Public Ignorance

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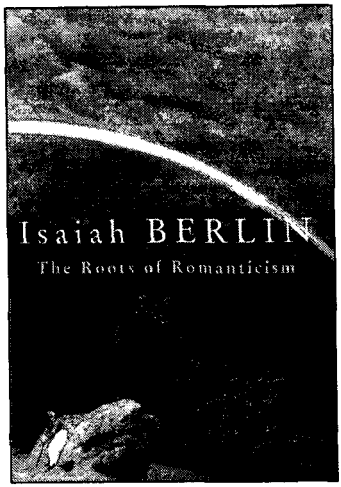

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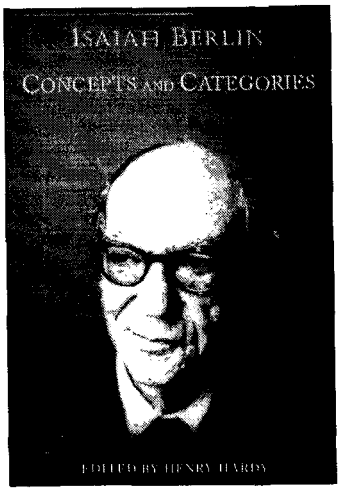

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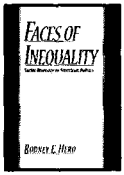

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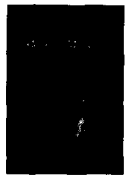

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Jeffrey Friedman

INTRODUCTION: PUBLIC IGNORANCE AND DEMOCRATIC THEORY

This issue of *Critical Review* concerns something that is so obvious that virtually everyone probably notices it from time to time, yet so important that if we were to focus on it intently, it would overturn our understanding of politics and as well, quite possibly, many of our political commitments. The subject is the pervasiveness of popular ignorance about politics and government.

That the public is overwhelmingly ignorant when it comes to politics is not merely the despairing hypothesis of conservatives unable to understand the popularity of a Bill Clinton, or liberals unable to understand that of a Ronald Reagan. It is a discovery that has been replicated unfailingly by political scientists; indeed, it is one of the strongest findings that have been produced by any social science—possibly *the* strongest. Yet for all the rock-solid evidence behind it, the finding of public ignorance is little known to those whose business it is to analyze public opinion. Pollsters, pundits, journalists, and nonspecialist scholars routinely attribute movements in public opinion to the effect of subtle philosophical and policy debates that are, in reality, the purview of small elites—debates of which the general public usually has not the slightest knowledge. Similarly, elections are consistently overinterpreted as "mandates" for philosophical convictions or

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policy positions of which most voters are only dimly aware. (The vast majority of the 1994 U.S. electorate had not even heard of the "Contract with America" for which the victorious Republican party claimed a mandate; see Davidson and Oleszek 1996, 111.)

As Philip Converse showed in his pivotal contribution to the public-ignorance literature, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (1964), most people's political opinions are based not on attention to high-flown political debate, but instead on extremely ill-informed judgments about "the nature of the times" (prosperity? peace?) and about the interests of the groups with which they identify. Since even these primitive judgments require information about what the nature of the times really is, or about what the effects of public policies on groups really are—and about who or what is responsible for the nature of the times or the effects of public policies—the door is wide open to the manipulation of public opinion by those who can spin this information in the simplest or otherwise most compelling way. Among these manipulators are government officials with access to the free media; candidates who can afford expensive advertising campaigns; and, less deliberately, journalists who inevitably must define and portray a given "issue" one way rather than another.

The failure of nonscholarly public-opinion analysts to recognize the fact of popular political ignorance probably stems from the analysts' own absorption in political information. Almost by definition, politically informed elites are much more interested in and familiar with political debates than the general public is. These elites see through spin more easily (at least when it conflicts with their political biases); they follow ongoing policy debates more carefully (which is to say, at all); and so, to them, the true insubstantiality of the mass public's reasoning about politics is almost unimaginable. The "disconnect" between elites and masses is hardly something that first became evident during the Year of Lewinsky. For instance, survey data and exit polling showed that Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980 because of bad economic times and dislike of President Carter, not approval of Reagan's conservatism (Schwab 1991, 42-44). Yet the bias toward more philosophically elevated interpretations of Reagan's "mandate" was so strong that the media felt compelled to report the 1980 election as a massive "shift to the right"—which is presumably why media personnel, aware of Reagan's ideology, would have voted for him, had they done so.

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More recently we have been reminded, by the success of President Clinton's defenders, that in a democracy there is often no more persuasive argument than the circular appeal to public opinion itself. Timur Kuran's contribution to this issue—like his own research, assessed here by Philip Tetlock—concerns the stifling effects that can be produced by respect for the will of the people as such. One such effect is that bad ideas may be perpetuated by dissidents' fear of expressing criticisms that might prove upsetting to other people.

The Triumph of the Will

Public ignorance poses two direct threats to the legitimacy of democratic government. These two threats correspond to two different rationales for democracy.

The first rationale might be called "democratic voluntarism." This is the commonplace view that the public is sovereign and therefore has a *right* to exercise its will through democratic procedures, regardless of the outcome (at least as long as the outcome doesn't threaten those procedures or the rights of individuals). This view presupposes the existence of a public will. But Converse found that the public is so ignorant of politics that in many cases, its political attitudes are highly unstable. If attitudes are so evanescent as to be almost nonexistent, then there may be no public will at all.

Most of the scholarly reaction to Converse has taken the form of debate over this "nonattitudes" thesis. Preoccupation with whether or not the public has attitudes at all has prompted many writers to assume that all they need do to defend democracy from the threat posed by public ignorance is demonstrate that a given public has some core set of stable beliefs. One need only read Robert Shapiro's discussion below of the most important post-Converse work of public-opinion scholarship, John Zaller's *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, to grasp the extent of public ignorance, even if it does not sink to the level of "nonattitudes." But in worrying about the nonattitudes thesis, such discussions subtly shift the focus away from the *quality* of the public "will." As Shapiro and Zaller both note, the mere existence of relatively stable public attitudes tells us nothing about how well informed these attitudes are. A willful public, like a willful individual, can be—and, as both Shapiro's and Zaller's work confirms, usually is—utterly ignorant (Page and Shapiro 1992; Zaller 1992). But

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because democratic voluntarism cannot, by its very nature, allow itself to question the *content* of what the public wills—since in the voluntarist view, the will of the majority is sovereign, regardless of content—the issue of the wisdom of democratic decisions has tended to live in the shadows of the public-opinion literature. All specialists know that public ignorance lurks there, but their attention is usually distracted from it by peripheral matters, including the nonattitudes question.

An exception is the attention devoted to whether public ignorance permits the manipulation or manufacture of public opinion by media and political elites. Democratic voluntarists care about this because they see opinion manipulation as necessarily bad: it means that the will of a few is taking the place of the will of the majority. The empirical evidence of such "media effects" is incisively reviewed here by Richard Anderson, who draws some surprising inferences from it. Anderson points out that public ignorance is what gives the media their vast power over public opinion. And he underscores the conflict between deliberation and participation: the wider the participating population, the likelier it is to be too ignorant of politics to be able to deliberate intelligently, because far more people are ignorant about politics than are knowledgeable about it. But Anderson concludes that participation, not deliberation, should be our goal, regardless of the ignorance of the participants, because their political involvement may force politicians to cater to them by enacting desirable reforms. Indeed, media effects might be a good thing, Anderson suggests, as long as they bring about more participation—for example, by making politics more understandable, even at the price of oversimplifying it.

Anderson's argument brings into sharp relief the tension between voluntarism and the other rationale for democracy, which might be called "instrumentalism." Instrumentalists value the effects of democracy, not its embodiment of the popular will per se. At their most ambitious, democratic instrumentalists hold that democracy can safeguard the public interest. Anderson believes that the public interest lies in the expansion of individual liberty, and he draws on U.S. history to conclude that this interest will be promoted by the type of reforms that are spurred by a broad electorate. Although the expansion of liberty is a less robust version of the public interest than most instrumentalists would accept, Anderson can still be seen as an instrumentalist because, according democracy no inherent value, he measures its desirability against its production of something else

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(freedom). But if the electorate is grossly uninformed, as Anderson believes it to be, it is possible that the reforms it engenders may not turn out to be positive ones according to any standard—unless, contrary to Anderson's intent, *whatever* reforms the people will are seen as positive. Thus, his position illustrates the difficulty of squaring an instrumentalist rationale for democracy with the fact of public ignorance. Any non-tautological conception of the public good must have some content; if democracy is to be instrumental to this content, the *demos* must make judgments about facts; but it is factual information about nearly everything political that the *demos* lacks.

Defenders of democracy may be inclined by this problem to retreat to democratic voluntarism, since it imposes no knowledgeability requirement on the *demos*. But the possibility of "nonattitudes" is not the only difficulty with voluntarism, despite the attention it continues to receive. The deeper problem is one of philosophical incoherence, as indicated by the circularity of appeals to public opinion as criteria of the public good. Richard Wollheim pointed out in "A Paradox in the Theory of Democracy" (1972) that the voter is in the strange position of voting not on the basis of what is objectively good, but rather on the basis of what the majority thinks good—if, as democratic voluntarism holds, the will of the majority is intrinsically rather than instrumentally valuable. But if whatever the majority decides becomes good by virtue of that decision (e.g., Walzer 1981), how could a majority decide anything at all? Whatever it decided would become good automatically; but prior to the majority's decision, lacking an external good toward which its decision could be directed instrumentally, voters would have no basis for choice.

A voluntarist may answer that one should vote one's "preferences," but this is a non sequitur: what the voter wants to know is what she *should* prefer. Voluntarists may therefore be tempted to turn to theories of positive autonomy, as opposed to the negative freedom to pursue preferences. Autonomy theory, when applied to democratic decisions, would hold that one should let one's "authentic" or "deep" identity, as opposed to transitory preferences, determine one's vote. In its liberal version, autonomy theory would maintain that each individual should vote her individual long-term values; in the communitarian version, she should vote the long-term values of her community. But this solution continues to mistake what is valued (whether by the individual or the community) for what is valuable. Consequently, it does not solve the problem of indeterminacy, for each de-

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cision about what to value today will affect what appears, tomorrow, to be the individual's or the community's long-term identity. If, by accidentally departing from yesterday's values, one would accord legitimacy to this departure tomorrow, why should one not be able *deliberately* to depart from yesterday's values, achieving, over the long run, the same self-validation for the departure? If it were legitimate to do so, however, the criterion of "authenticity" would lose all determinate content: since today's departure from yesterday's identity helps constitute tomorrow's identity, anything goes. Unless one inexplicably privileges an originary moment (e.g., a constitutional founding) as sacred, and refuses to accept either that it had a prehistory or that any deviation from it is justifiable, one's "identity," individual or collective, is merely a baroque version of the indeterminate voluntarist "preferences" it is supposed to remedy.

The source of the indeterminacy is that voluntarism (ironically) fails to take seriously the freedom of the will. A voter with free will requires a decision criterion; but for such a criterion ("the good") to be a *motivating* criterion, it must (putatively) be *valid*. And if it is valid, then there is no reason, in principle, to allow a majority using a different, invalid conception of the good as its decision criterion to prevail, as democratic voluntarism requires. Thus, there is an inherent contradiction between the *fact* of free will and the voluntarist *normative* apotheosis of free decisions. Free will requires that we decide on the basis of putative goods whose validity is taken to be anterior to our decision; but if free decisions are intrinsically valuable, they effectively render valid whatever our criterion of the good is *posterior* to the decision. If whatever the majority decides *becomes* good by virtue of its approval by the majority, then the majority, or its members, have no way of deciding what is good prior to the vote. If, on the contrary, one has free will, one votes on the basis of what appears to be good. But in that case, one has no basis in principle for accepting majority decisions that appear to be bad. A free agent might, of course, allow that, as a practical matter, she should should defer to the majority even when it is wrong—in the interest of serving the true good in an imperfect world, where trying to impose the good on the majority would be counterproductive. But this type of rationale for democracy, like the sixteenth-century *politiques*' justification for religious toleration, is instrumentalist.

By favoring the will of the people over any independent criterion of the good that might motivate its free will, voluntarist democrats implicitly deny that the people's will is free; for if it were, it would

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have to be motivated by the independent goodness of what it aimed at. The presupposition of a claim to independent goodness is that the claim might be false (it is a truth claim), and thus that any given majority might be wrong. In short, the presupposition of free choice is that one may err—which the democratic voluntarist cannot allow, when the "one" in question is the people. The metaphysical implication of the voluntarist democrat's metaethics, then, is determinism. We see this at ground level in the privileging by democratic cultures of both individual and collective "values" and "preferences" as ends that cannot be questioned normatively and that, therefore, motivate people not freely, but as a matter of their incorrigible "identities."

Constraining Democracy?

Where democratic voluntarism emphasizes collective will and therefore communal identity, *liberal* voluntarism requires that the collective will allow freedom to the individual will. Thus, liberal voluntarists demand that democracy respect the "human liberties" to which Anderson maintains that democracy is instrumental. Where straightforward voluntarist democrats accord legitimacy to any democratic decision (at least if it does not stymie future democratic decisions), liberals constrain such decisions so they do not interfere with individual rights.[1] Autonomy-based versions of liberal democracy similarly constrain voluntarism: they require democratic decisions to be consistent with the "authentic" values of the individual—which can be, depending on the theorist, either the individual's own "deepest" values or those of her community.

Since the manipulation of either individual or collective opinion could lead to the enactment of illiberal or inauthentic preferences, liberal and autonomy theories achieve critical distance from the decisions of real-world democracies. But this is not the critical distance achieved by democratic instrumentalism; thus, the criterion that leads autonomy theorists to oppose opinion manipulation remains the freedom of the people to do whatever they "authentically" want to do. As Tom Hoffman's important paper suggests, both autonomy theorists and instrumentalists want politics to serve some good that is higher than the aggregation of mere individual preferences. Both camps condemn as "irrational" those decisions of the *demos* that, while instrumental to individuals' actual ends, are not instrumental to

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good ends. But in the case of the autonomy theorists, the good ends toward which democracy is supposed to lead are equated with the unmanipulated values of either individuals or their communities. Whatever the people *really* will, consistent with their individual or collective identity, is, *ipso facto*, "rational." (Indeed, in the final analysis, the communitarian versions of autonomy theory are not so different from the individualistic versions, because an unmanipulated public opinion is one that expresses what the communitarians maintain are the collectively formed preferences *individuals* would express if they were really free.) Both forms of autonomy theory suffer the same debility that afflicts straightforward democratic and liberal voluntarism: the impossibility of finding a decision criterion if decisions—be they the decisions of the people or of the person—are, by virtue of being freely willed (either in the negative sense of being uncoerced or in the positive sense of being unmanipulated), self-validating. In short, the only way to escape the voluntarist conundrum is to make a clean break with the idea that *either* the free or the autonomous decisions of *either* the individual or the community are intrinsically valuable. The alternative is to see individual or collective sovereignty as, at best, instrumental to some good other than the sovereign agent's ability to choose among goods: instrumental, that is, to a good such as truth, beauty, or happiness.

Once one judges political systems by their instrumental efficacy in achieving such an end, however, the manipulation of opinion cannot be seen as inherently bad. Manipulation may, in some cases, actually be good—if it leads the public in a good direction. (This is close to Anderson's view.) But a democracy that is instrumental to the good only because it is manipulated by good elites is hardly a *true* democracy.

The real problem, in instrumentalist eyes, is not manipulation but the ignorance that makes it possible. An ignorant public is unlikely to choose policies or leaders that are instrumental to the good (whatever the good is). Opinion manipulation, like the nonexistence of stable "attitudes," should, according to the instrumentalist, be seen not as evil in itself but as a sign that the *demos* should not be trusted.

The False Allure of Elitism—and Populism

Thus, it might seem that rule by experts, not by the people, would be the best course for an instrumentalist to recommend. The only re-

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maining questions would be those that concerned premodern political theory: how to separate knowledgeable rulers from the ignorant ruled, and how to ensure that the rulers use their knowledge wisely—to secure "the good."

One of the underappreciated contributions of "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," however, is Converse's demonstration that in the real world of modern politics, the alternative to sheer ignorance is reliance on *ideology* to organize one's knowledge. The cognitive elite knows more about politics than the masses, but its superior knowledge is both enabled and "constrained" by the very belief systems, left and right, of which the masses are largely ignorant. Ideology tells ideologues what position to take on the "issue" *du jour* almost before the issue becomes known; as Converse (1964, 211) puts it, ideology tells us which positions "go with" which in the "'packages'" that the "consumers" of ideology "come to see as 'natural' wholes," but that are actually the products of acts of "creative synthesis" that can be carried off only by "a minuscule proportion of any population"—the Mills or Marxes or Hayeks who are the ultimate sources of ideologies. Ideologies are, in fact, simply more sophisticated heuristics than the primitive judgments of the "nature of the times" or "group interests" that guide the mass public.

The heuristic role of ideology suggests that even *relatively* knowledgeable elites are still ignorant, since they cannot judge the adequacy of their worldviews without abandoning ideology for an unattainable, universal expertise. While the "attitude constraint" made possible by ideology would, if more widespread, produce the stable public will that is so important to democratic voluntarists, ideological conviction can hardly be equated with the knowledge of the means to the good sought by instrumentalists. Thus, it is not at all evident that we would be (or are) better ruled by the knowledgeable but doctrinaire elite than by the ignorant but eclectic populace. Despite initial appearances, then, instrumentalism does not entail elitism.

In a pathbreaking contribution that draws on a vast body of empirical evidence, Ilya Somin suggests that there is an alternative to the Hobson's choice of rule by the ignorant or rule by the ideologues. Somin argues that by limiting the responsibilities of government, scarce public attention can be focused on a few issues, as it was focused in nineteenth-century America on such matters as the tariff and slavery. This, he maintains, might allow public decisions about these issues to be better informed. However, the harshly ideological

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nature of the nineteenth-century battles revolving around such issues, and the terrible judgments the public often made about them, may illustrate a weakness in Somin's argument. Somin does not consider the danger of ideological rule: he objects to elitism only on the classic Utilitarian ground that elites may have different interests than the masses, such that his critique of popular ignorance is transmogrified into a critique of elite control over the state. By attempting to make the public more politically engaged, as it was in the nineteenth century, Somin finds himself recommending that the public become more like contemporary elites so as to take back control of government from them. In this, he overlooks the fact that even a public as relatively well informed as are contemporary elites would be led by its remaining ignorance to rely on the heuristic of ideology.

If one sees democracy as instrumental to the public good, one's goal should hardly be to encourage the public to treat politics as ideologues do. The fact that ideology allows people to integrate more information than they otherwise could is not sufficient to justify it. Information is not an end in itself, in the instrumentalist view: it is a means to the end of good decisions, which are unlikely if they are driven by the dogmatic, demagogic, demonizing attitude of the ideologue. The ideologue uses his relatively large store of political information as an arsenal for intellectual combat, not as a resource for open-minded and well-informed decision making.

This problem in Somin's analysis may be related to his attribution of public ignorance to people's rationality. Following Anthony Downs, Somin argues that democratic citizens have no incentive to spend resources (primarily time) on acquiring political information, because each citizen's vote has an infinitesimal chance of affecting the electoral outcome. Thus, Somin reasons, the cost of acquiring information should be reduced by cutting back the number of issues about which one needs to be well informed; this could be achieved by reducing the scope of government. But, in parallel fashion, the cost of acquiring information is currently reduced for political elites, because their preset ideologies make most political issues seem clearcut; acquiring relevant information (and screening out information that seems irrelevant because it does not fit into ideologically framed pigeonholes) is much less costly when one already knows what conclusions one is trying to reach. It may therefore be the case that only if we can *avoid* thinking of political ignorance as a matter of rationality

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will we find a way to rectify ignorance that does not exacerbate the arguably worse problem of ideology.

As Somin acknowledges, one of the most powerful objections to the rational-ignorance argument is the fact that so many people do, in fact, vote. The voters' alleged recognition of the minuscule chance that their votes will matter underlies the claim that they are rationally ignorant: it is the unimportance of one's vote that renders it unimportant to be politically informed. But if voters recognize that it is unimportant to become well informed because their vote does not really count, why do they bother voting? Somin's main answer is that most voters overestimate the impact of their vote. But even somebody who overestimates the efficacy of the ballot will not bother to vote if she has no opinion about which outcome is desirable, and one cannot form such an opinion without a level of information one thinks adequate to justify it. So rational voters must be underestimating their ignorance as well as overestimating their political efficacy. To make rationality compatible with voting, then, one must reject the rational-ignorance hypothesis; one who thinks it rational to be ignorant would necessarily have to recognize her ignorance, and this would deprive her of the "attitudes" necessary to motivate her to vote. All those real-world rational voters must think it rational to be well informed. For even an effective vote is pointless if it is not informed, since it may produce results contrary to the voter's goal.

This is not to say that the relatively greater cost of being well informed, as opposed to merely voting, might not deter those who would otherwise inform themselves from doing so. But the costliness of being well informed would also deter these rational ignoramuses from voting. The sheer fact that people cast ballots out of a mistaken belief in their efficacy shows that they must also mistakenly believe that they are, in fact, adequately informed. So their ignorance cannot be attributed to their conclusion that acquiring adequate information is too costly.

The reality is that not only do many people vote, many people attempt to acquire political information (to varying degrees), and everyone who votes as a matter of instrumental rationality must think that by virtue of the information she has acquired, her vote is a worthwhile one. (Somin acknowledges that there are instrumentally irrational reasons for voting, such as the fulfilment of duty and the expression of emotion. But usually the duty in question is not just the duty to vote, but to cast an informed vote; and the emotion in

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question would not be felt if one did not also feel that one understood what was at stake in the election.) This is presumably why public-opinion surveys rarely register majorities in the "Don't know" category, even though the empirical data masterfully surveyed by Somin show that most respondents don't, in fact, know enough about nearly any political issue to make an objectively informed judgment. Subjectively, people do not *realize* how ignorant they are, and this is hardly surprising: it is in the very nature of ignorance.[2]

If public ignorance is not rational, what does explain it? An answer can be found in Joseph Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. Although Schumpeter most often endorses the rational-ignorance theory (e.g., 1950, 261), he suggests a different and more compelling explanation of political ignorance when he compares political and commercial advertising. Both types of persuasion, he maintains, play both on (rational) ignorance and on the irrationality it feeds; but there is the difference that the tricks of advertising

> have infinitely more scope in the sphere of public affairs than they have in the sphere of private and professional life. The picture of the prettiest girl that ever lived will in the long run prove powerless to maintain the sales of a bad cigarette. There is no equally effective safeguard in the case of political decisions. Many decisions of fateful importance are of a nature that makes it impossible for the public to experiment with them at its leisure and at moderate cost. Even if that is possible, however, judgment is as a rule not so easy to arrive at as it is in the case of a cigarette, because *effects are less easy to interpret.* (Ibid., 263, emphasis added)

The emphasized passage breaks loose from the rational-choice preoccupation with the *motivation* to acquire political information. Here Schumpeter concedes, if only for the sake of argument, what does in fact seem to be true: that many people who are *highly* motivated to acquire political information—not just voters, but ideologues—and who *think* that the available information is equivalent to experimental data are, nonetheless, unable to acquire enough information to judge the wisdom of public decisions as adequately as they can judge the wisdom of private ones. The reason is the lack of *clearly interpretable* "feedback" from public decisions. If a policy to enhance national defense is enacted and military preparedness declines—itself a matter nobody can directly perceive—is the new policy at fault, or might preparedness have declined even more without it? If unemployment

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falls (again, an intangible in the aggregate), is the president responsible, or the chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, or some exogenous factor? These are questions that even scholars who devote their lifetimes to studying them disagree about. In contrast, when one buys a bad cigarette, one tastes one's mistake immediately; and so it is with many other private decisions. While people are fallible in everything they do, so that their private decisions are, obviously, very often bad ones; and while private decisions often do not have the immediate consequences that serve as the most effective feedback (consider the decision to smoke cigarettes in the first place, which may impair one's health, but only far down the road; or the decision about whom to marry); it is still highly plausible that public decisions are much less likely to provide adequate feedback than private ones. Ignorance is, no doubt, pervasive; but it is often more remediable at the private than at the public level, since negative feedback allows one to notice precisely what is missed by masses and elites alike: that their decision *was*, in fact, ignorant.

In the absence of clear feedback, adequately informed political decisions would require unattainable levels of theoretical and empirical knowledge. It is as if one tried to decide which cigarette to buy by analyzing the chemical composition of each brand's blend of tobacco—or by relying on the testimony of experts. But in politics, how does one know which experts to trust, without being, oneself, an expert? This is where ideology or some other heuristic must enter, no matter how conscientious the decision maker tries to be.

In one sense this line of reasoning might suggest that Somin's solution is right, but for the wrong reason. Perhaps the role of government should be shrunk, not because the remaining decisions will be more informed—there will still be as little direct feedback about defense preparedness when it is one of a few items on the public agenda as when it is one of many—but because the decisions taken off the agenda are likely to be more informed by perceivable feedback when they are "privatized." Although James Q. Wilson dismisses the importance of public ignorance, there is much in his discussion of the rationality of politics that is consistent with this possibility. One must proceed in this direction with caution, however: ignorance is not the only threat to the good. It may be that, on balance, other considerations, such as the power inequalities that follow from depoliticization, would undermine such goods as happiness more than does the ignorance characteristic of democratic decision procedures.

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On the other hand, Rogan Kersh suggests that political ignorance not only leads to demands for public "action" to solve problems that may not exist, but to dissatisfaction with democratic decision procedures themselves because of their conflictual nature (which stems from the role ideology necessarily plays in them). An instrumentalist cannot consider this outcome to be inherently undesirable, but a *democratic* instrumentalist might: she would only support democratic procedures in the first place if they seemed likely to produce good results. The democratic instrumentalist must therefore distinguish between a highly politicized democracy, in which many items are on the political agenda, and a democratic society, in which *whatever* items are on the political agenda are decided democratically. While there are cogent instrumentalist arguments for politicization as well as against it, there are separate instrumentalist arguments for democracy that do not entail that everything should be decided democratically. One might follow Karl Popper, for example, in favoring democracy as the best corrective for public policies that are so disastrous that they *do* create discernible negative feedback (see Eidlin 1996). Even though the electorate may not be able to figure out what went wrong or which alternative policies will do better, democracy at least allows the people to throw out the ruling elite on the chance that it is, in fact, responsible for awful conditions, and *in extremis*, this power can be valuable.

Popper's may be a strong argument for subjecting political decisions to democratic processes, but it does not necessarily indicate that all decisions should be made politically, since it may be found that a better way to ensure against disaster in some area is to "privatize" it. Although a great deal of evidence would have to be assembled before we conclude that it would be wise, on such grounds, radically to restrict the range of matters subject to democratic decision, Kersh's argument must make one wonder if a society in which democratic procedures have broad scope because little is privatized may end up undermining what is most valuable about those procedures.

NOTES

1. This is an ideal typology; space does not allow a discussion of where contemporary democratic theories should be placed, beyond observing that the version of "deliberative democracy" advanced by Amy Gutmann and Dennis

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Thompson (1996) belongs in the liberal-voluntarist camp because it is designed to constrain democracy to respect people's equal freedoms, while that proposed by James Fishkin (1991), which appears to be instrumentalist because it values informed decisions, collapses into voluntarism because it leaves decisions in the hands of the majority even if informed decisions are not forthcoming. Somin, Hoffman, and Kuran disscuss deliberative democracy at greater length in these pages.

2. Nor will it do to attribute the information acquisition that does take place to the entertainment value of politics, as Somin does, since for the most part, politics as a spectacle seems to alienate people; it is politics as a means to one's ends (whether these ends are selfish or "sociotropic") that draws people into the spectacle, even though only a very small minority of those drawn in have real (as opposed to perceived) power to advance their ends by participating in, and hence becoming informed about, politics. Apart from those few politics junkies for whom it is a hobby, the main entertainment value of politics lies in being engaged by what seem to be important matters to whose resolution one is, as a citizen, a potential contributor.

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Ilya Somin

VOTER IGNORANCE AND THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAL

> The typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again.
>
> —Joseph Schumpeter (1950, 262)

ABSTRACT: *If voters do not understand the programs of rival candidates or their likely consequences, they cannot rationally exercise control over government. An ignorant electorate cannot achieve true democratic control over public policy. The immense size and scope of modern government makes it virtually impossible for voters to acquire sufficient knowledge to exercise such control. The problem is exacerbated by voters' strong incentive to be "rationally ignorant" of politics. This danger to democracy cannot readily be circumvented through "shortcut" methods of economizing on voter knowledge costs. A truly democratic government must, therefore, be strictly limited in scope.*

An informed electorate is an indispensable prerequisite for democracy. Inadequate voter knowledge has two distinct negative implications for democracy. First, it prevents democratic government from reflecting the will of the people in any meaningful sense, undercutting the intrinsicist case for democracy as a government that reflects the voluntary decisions of the populace, a case that has been defended

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by such theorists as Carole Pateman (1971) and Benjamin Barber (1984). Likewise, voter ignorance imperils the instrumental case for democracy as a regime that serves the interests of the majority, since ignorance potentially opens the door for both elite manipulation of the public (see, e.g., Zaller 1992) and gross policy errors caused by politicians' need to appeal to an ignorant electorate in order to win office.

In this article, I review the overwhelming evidence suggesting that the American electorate fails to meet even the most minimal criteria for adequate voter knowledge, and I consider the implications of this apparently irremediable reality for political theory. Part I lays out minimal knowledge prerequisites for voter control of public policy, summarizes the massive evidence of voter ignorance that students of the subject have accumulated over the years, and highlights some of the most disturbing implications of these studies. In Part II, I review and criticize theories suggesting that "information shortcuts" such as political parties, issue publics, and cues from opinion leaders can enable voters to control government in spite of pervasive ignorance. These mechanisms are unable to overcome ignorance and sometimes actually exacerbate the problem.

Part III advances the claim that the size and scope of the modern state is so great that it is impossible for voters—even the most knowledgeable among them—to be adequately informed about all its operations. This conclusion leads to the counterintuitive suggestion that a smaller government may actually be more democratic than modern mass democracies are, in that voters would stand more chance of being able to influence the policies of a small goovernment in an informed manner. I briefly examine some evidence from nineteenth-century American history suggesting that the less-educated electorate of that era was able to consider far more complex policy arguments than those that are presented to it today, and I hypothesize that this difference is largely due to the ability of nineteenth-century voters to focus on the relatively small number of issues over which the strictly limited government of that era exercised control.

Part IV restates the argument that ignorance is largely "rational," rooted in the very low likelihood of a single vote being able to influence electoral outcomes (Downs 1957, ch. 13). To the extent that the arguments of Parts III and IV are correct, there are severe limits to the likely effectiveness of efforts to increase the stock of knowledge possessed by voters. A more promising path for reform would be to

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reduce the amount of knowledge required for democratic control of public policy.

In Part V, I relate findings of massive public ignorance to recent developments in political theory. I argue that the theory of deliberative democracy—an important strain in recent political thought—is unrealistic in light of the extent and intractability of voter ignorance. I also review the works of "conservative majoritarian" theorists who contend that elected legislatures must be given maximum scope (especially relative to unelected judges) because the laws they pass express the will of the people. In the face of extensive voter ignorance, this claim is subject to serious question. Finally, Part VI emphasizes the tradeoff between big government and democratic government that all advanced industrialized states must face.

I. THE EXTENT AND CAUSES OF VOTER IGNORANCE

What must voters know to exercise democratic control over government policy? In their classic work, *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960, ch. 8), a team from the University of Michigan Survey Research Center defined three minimal knowledge prerequisites for voters to be able to exert meaningful influence over a given issue. First, voters must be aware of the issue's existence. Second, they must have a position on the issue. And third, they must know the positions on the issue of the opposing candidates in a given election.

These three conditions have formed the basis for most empirical investigations of individual-level voter ignorance since *The American Voter*.[1] But they are not, in fact, sufficient prerequisites for meaningful control over public policy. In addition to awareness of the existence of relevant issues and of candidate positions on them, informed voters must have at least some substantial understanding of which of the available policy options are most likely to advance their goals. Unless the value voters attach to policy in a given area is purely a matter of symbolic "position-taking" (Mayhew 1974), they cannot use the ballot to force elected officials to serve their interests without knowing what the likely effects of alternative policy options are.[2] Ideally, then, voters should be able to choose between opposing candidates and their platforms on the basis of "the preferences that people would have if their information were perfect" (Mansbridge 1980, 25). Although this is impossible, we can nonetheless expect *minimally* informed voters at least to be aware of

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basic tradeoffs between alternative policies in cases where those tradeoffs would be immediately obvious to political elites informed about the issue at hand, and *not* to draw linkages between policies and outcomes that informed observers would consider obviously absurd. For instance, the fact that a majority of American voters with an opinion on the issue believe that the federal government is too large and powerful and simultaneously favor increased spending in almost every major area of federal involvement is a clear case of a knowledge of tradeoffs that falls below the threshold of minimally necessary knowledge (Bennett and Bennett 1990, chs. 2, 4). Where, on the other hand, there is clear disagreement among the well informed about the effects of a particular policy, support or opposition to that policy should not, in and of itself, count as presumptive evidence of voter ignorance.

This standard adds a crucial substantive dimension to the criteria for minimally necessary voter knowledge without judging voters' competence by how closely their policy preferences match those of the analyst. Moreover, nothing in the definition preemptively forecloses the possibility that each *individual* voter may not need to possess the requisite knowledge, so long as the electorate in the aggregate possesses sufficient information and signalling capacity to act "as if" voters were individually informed (as in Grofman and Withers 1993; Page and Shapiro 1992; Converse 1990; Stimson 1990).

The Extent of Voter Ignorance

"Nothing strikes the student of public opinion and democracy more forcefully than the paucity of information most people possess about politics" (Ferejohn 1990, 3). Few dispute the well-established conclusion that most individual voters are abysmally ignorant of even very basic political information. Ever since the seminal work of Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee (1954), Angus Campbell et al. (1960), and Philip Converse (1964), evidence has accumulated to reinforce this finding.

Nonetheless, the sheer depth of most individual voters' ignorance is shocking to those who are unfamiliar with these research results. As of December 1994, a month after the capture of Congress by the Republican party, 57 percent of Americans had never even heard of Newt Gingrich, whose campaign strategy and policy stances had re-

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ceived massive publicity in the immediately preceding weeks (Kosova 1995). In 1964, in the midst of the Cold War, only 38 percent of the U.S. public was aware that the Soviet Union was *not* a member of NATO (Page and Shapiro 1992, 10). In the mid-1980s, only 43 percent knew of the Strategic Defense Initiative, and only 22 percent knew that it was U.S. policy to use nuclear weapons in the event of a Soviet attack on Western Europe (Graham 1988, 331–32). Only bare majorities know which party has control of the Senate, some 70 percent cannot name either of their state's senators, and an average of 56 percent over the years cannot name *any* congressional candidate in their district at the height of a campaign (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 94; Neumann 1986, 15). Overall, close to a third of Americans can be categorized as "know-nothings" who are almost completely ignorant of relevant political information (Bennett 1988)—which is not, by any means, to suggest that the other two-thirds are well informed.

Systematic studies of voter knowledge in countries other than the United States are comparatively rare, but the general pattern is roughly similar. To take a particularly telling example, a massive study by Converse and Roy Pierce (1986) found that French voters are not significantly better informed than are Americans, despite the French electorate's historic reputation for high ideological and political awareness.[3]

Three aspects of voter ignorance deserve particular attention. First, voters are not just ignorant about specific policy issues, but about the basic structure of government and how it operates (Neumann 1986; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991 and 1996, ch. 2; Bennett 1988). Majorities are ignorant of such basic aspects of the U.S. political system as who has the power to declare war, the respective functions of the three branches of government, and who controls monetary policy (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 70–71). This suggests that voters not only cannot choose between specific competing policy *programs*, but also cannot accurately assign credit and blame for highly visible policy *outcomes* to the right office-holders. The long-noted tendency of voters to attribute "good times" almost automatically to incumbents (Converse 1964) is one reflection of this problem.

The second salient aspect of voter ignorance is that most voters lack an "ideological" view of politics capable of integrating multiple issues into a single analytical framework derived from a few basic principles; ordinary voters rarely exhibit the kind of ideological con-

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sistency in issue stances that are evident in surveys of political elites (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964, 1970, 1975, and 1990; Neumann 1986; Bennett 1988; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Jennings 1992). Most scholars follow Downs (1957, ch. 7) in emphasizing the usefulness of ideology as a "shortcut" to predicting the likely policies of opposing parties competing for office (Popkin 1991, 52 and idem 1993). Generally ignored, but at least equally important, is the comparative inability of nonideological voters to spot *interconnections* among issues. An ideologically aware electorate would not be oblivious to the contradiction between seeking a reduction in government power and an expansion of nearly all its major programs.

Some researchers hold that "policy moods," desires for the government to do "more" or "less" about a particular problem, and values such as individualism, equal opportunity, or generosity, can play some of the same roles for ordinary voters that ideologies do for elites (Feldman 1988; Stimson 1991; Page and Shapiro 1992).[4] However, these values taken in and of themselves do not provide adequate guidance for voters. One cannot know whether increased spending on antipoverty programs will diminish poverty without some additional "ideological" understanding of how these programs operate and whether or not they are likely to succeed. Similarly, one cannot have even a minimally informed opinion about whether government should do more or less in a particular issue area without possessing some knowledge of how much government is doing already and with what results. None of this can be known by the individual voter without either specific knowledge of the issue area in question or a general "ideological" understanding of where government can and cannot be expected to be effective.

Voter ignorance of basic institutional structure and of ideological interconnections between issues casts doubt on the standard criticism of conventional tests of voter knowledge. This critique holds that it is unfair to test voter knowledge through factual "civics test-style" surveys because ordinary voters have an "on-line" mode of information processing under which specific facts are quickly forgotten but inchoate impressions are retained for later use at the polls (Graber 1994; Popkin 1991; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). Without knowledge of the basic "rules of the game" of politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, ch. 2) and of ideological interconnections between issues, there is unlikely to be a sufficient preexisting base of knowledge for the impressions gained from campaign information to be accu-

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rate; and even if they are accurate, they cannot be easily connected with the voter's policy objectives. It is no surprise, therefore, that the small minority of well-informed voters is much better able to process new political information and is more resistant to manipulation than is the uninformed mass public (Neumann 1986; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 234–35; Kinder and Sanders 1990; Zaller 1992).

Finally, it is important to note that the level of political knowledge in the American electorate has increased only very slightly, if at all, since the beginning of mass survey research in the late 1930s (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991 and 1996; Bennett 1989; Smith 1989). A relatively stable level of extreme ignorance has persisted even in the face of huge and widespread increases in educational attainment and an unprecedented expansion in the quantity and quality of information that is available to the public at little cost. This striking failure throws doubt on the expectation of political theorists from John Stuart Mill ([1861] 1958) to Amy Gutmann (1987) that an increased availability of formal education can create the informed electorate that the democratic ideal requires.

II. THE SHORTCOMINGS OF SHORTCUTS

Individual-level voter ignorance seems deeply rooted, perhaps ineradicable. But the ability of voters to meet the conditions of the democratic ideal may be resuscitated by "shortcut" theories, which predict that voters can cast informed votes without themselves possessing even minimal levels of political knowledge.

Before discussing specific shortcut theories, it is important to highlight three general shortcomings common to many (though not all) of them. First, most of these theories address only the first and third knowledge prerequisites set down by Campbell and his colleagues (1960, ch. 8). The theories show, at best, that voters can discern the existence of issues and the opposing stances of candidates; but they do not demonstrate that voters can meaningfully relate this knowledge to the achievement of their preferred policy objectives. Second, there is a strong tendency in some of these theories to equate the *rationality* and *stability* of voter information-seeking behavior with the *adequacy* of information possessed by voters.[5] Scholars are intent on proving that voters "are not fools" (Key 1966, 7; Fiorina 1981, 5). Yet, as Anthony Downs suggested (1957, ch. 13; part IV below), it is perfectly rational—not foolish—for voters to be inadequately in-

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formed, and stability in voter attitudes may simply be a product of persistent misconceptions caused by ignorance. Third, several of the most influential theories either neglect or unduly minimize the incentives for misinformation built into the system.

Information From Daily Life

Some scholars, notably Samuel Popkin (1991 and 1993; see also Wittman 1996, ch. 1) have taken up Downs's (1957, ch. 12) suggestion that rational voters will make use of information acquired through ordinary daily-life interactions; such information is virtually "free," since the activities that produce it would be undertaken even in the absence of any political purpose. Unlike Downs, however, Popkin and his supporters argue not only that this information will be utilized, but that it goes a long way toward meeting voters' informational needs (Popkin 1991, 23–24). Most people allegedly can obtain "a good deal of information" about the economy from personal financial transactions such as managing a checking account or seeking employment (ibid., 23). Morris Fiorina (1981, 5) goes so far as to suggest that "in order to ascertain whether the incumbents have performed well or poorly citizens need only calculate the changes in their own welfare."[6]

While it would be foolish to deny that *some* helpful information can be derived from ordinary life, its usefulness to otherwise ill-informed voters is greatly overestimated. Three major limitations of such information are particularly important. First, by definition, this approach is of no help in dealing with the many issues that the vast majority of voters do not encounter in daily life. Second, even if the voter has, following Fiorina's suggestion, carefully calculated the changes in her welfare and developed a judgment on incumbent policies, she cannot readily determine whether her welfare will be improved by electing the opposing candidate; even if things have gotten worse under President X, perhaps Challenger Y's program is even more harmful. This possibility cannot be ruled out without substantive issue knowledge going beyond personal experience.

Most important of all, substantive knowledge is required to determine whether or not a particular personal experience really is the result of public policy and, if so, which political actors are responsible. Ill-informed voters attempting to make political judgments on the

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basis of personal experience may fall into egregious errors. Even with respect to unemployment and inflation—basic economic issues with which most people have substantial personal experience—ill-informed voters tend to make spectacular errors. In a survey taken during the 1992 election, during which economic issues were a particular focus of publicity, the vast majority of respondents could not estimate the inflation or unemployment rate within 5 percent of the actual levels (Holbrook and Garand 1996, 361); the electorate's mean estimates of both rates were approximately twice as high as the real level (ibid., 360). Such misperception apparently played a major role in swinging the 1992 election against the incumbent president, George Bush (ibid.). Poorly informed voters are more likely than well-informed ones to make sweeping generalizations from personal experience with unemployment, yet are less likely to make *accurate* connections between experience and policy (Mutz 1993; Conover, Feldman, and Knight 1986).

If errors of this magnitude occur in the cases of inflation and unemployment, even more serious mistakes can be expected with other, more remote, issues. And even a correct estimate of unemployment and inflation is only a minimal prerequisite to determining which party's policy on these issues will better serve the voter's interests. One still needs to know to what extent incumbents are responsible for current rates and whether or not their opponents are likely to do better. In and of itself, information from daily life is unlikely to be of much help in making such decisions.

Political Parties and Information Flows

The idea that political parties can help voters economize on information costs has a long and venerable lineage, dating back to Democratic party leader and later President Martin Van Buren, founder of the first modern mass-based party (Van Buren 1867; Remini 1959; Caeser 1979, ch. 3). The basic argument holds that voters can infer candidates' policy stances from their partisan affiliations rather than by undertaking the much more difficult task of inquiring into the views of each individual aspirant to office (Key 1949, ch. 14; Downs 1957, chs. 7–8; Aldrich 1995, 47–49). This claim is not entirely without merit. It is striking that a large proportion of the electorate, despite sweeping individual-level ignorance, can correctly identify the *relative* positions

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of the parties and their respective presidential candidates on a range of public policy issues (Aldrich 1995, 170–74).[7] Key (1966) adds the notion of party identification as a "standing decision" to be reevaluated in the face of experience with the party's officeholders, while Fiorina (1977; 1981; 1994, 9–10) presents evidence that voters rationally make use of past experience with the two parties in creating a "running tally" of their relative merits.

Appealing as it is, the argument obscures as much as it reveals. At best, a candidate's party affiliation is a clue to his policy stances, but it tells the voter little about the likely *effects* of those policies. Party affiliation helps voters meet the first and third knowledge requirements of the Michigan criteria but provides little guidance on relating that information to the voter's own goals. In principle, a "running tally" may help a voter to determine the merits as well as the content of a party's policies. But it is difficult to do so without substantial underlying substantive knowledge. If conditions are good under the rule of Party X, how does the voter know that this is due to the success of the party's policies rather than to factors beyond political control; preexisting favorable trends resulting from decisions made by the party's predecessors in power; personal characteristics of the party's officeholders that are not representative of the party as a whole and might be misleading as predictors of future behavior; or crafty manipulation of public policy by the party's leadership, as a result of which temporary success is achieved at the price of long-term harm that is felt years or even decades after these leaders leave office?[8] The voter cannot get around this dilemma simply by aggregating large amounts of experience, since it is unlikely that a given voter has been following politics long enough to experience more than two or three governments headed by any one party.[9]

Several other limitations of the party model are also significant. In multiparty systems where the number of parties is relatively large, keeping track of their positions may be only marginally less difficult than keeping tabs on individual candidates for office, as Converse and Pierce (1986) found in their study of French politics. The American focus of most voting research has obscured this important point, which applies with great force to multiparty systems common elsewhere in the world. Conversely, where party discipline is relatively lax, as it is in the United States, the positions of the party as a whole may be a poor predictor of the postitions of key individual candidates for office. Richard Nixon (Hoff 1992) and Bill Clinton are just two

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of the more recent examples of American presidents who pursued policies very different from those preferred by majorities within their own parties. As parties change their positions over time, inattentive voters may maintain partisan identities long after the party has jettisoned or deemphasized those policies that led them to support it in the first place (Campbell et al. 1960; Smith 1989).

Most dramatically, existing research on parties has largely ignored an important way in which the existence of political parties may actually *reduce* the flow of information to voters relative to a nonpartisan electoral system. If politicians are organized into (relatively) centralized parties, the number of effective political actors in the system is reduced; in most democratic political systems, there are rarely more than four or five major parties at any given time. As in any other competitive situation, the smaller the number of competitors, the greater the chance of successful collusion among them (Fellner 1949; Olson 1965). This sets up the possibility that the parties may conspire to take an issue of potential interest to the public off the political agenda in situations where this would benefit political elites at the expense of the rest of the citizenry. Such a cartel also diminishes the flow of information about the issue to the public, since it is no longer discussed by candidates running for office and the media are less likely to cover it.

Empirical examples of such collusion are not difficult to come by. The very first modern-style party system was initiated by Van Buren in part to take the issue of slavery off the political agenda in this way (Van Buren 1867; Ceaser 1979; Aldrich 1995). The resulting cartel lasted for some 25 years, until broken by disputes over the disposition of territory newly acquired in the Mexican War (Aldrich 1995). Other cases from a variety of political systems could easily be cited.[10]

Interparty collusion can be broken by the entry of new parties into the system, just as the Republican Party eventually emerged to challenge collusion over slavery. But organizing a major new party is extremely costly, and the existing parties can defend their oligopoly position through their ability to manipulate the electoral and campaign finance systems. At the very least, then, policy cartels can persist for a long time, even on so momentous an issue as slavery.[11]

This argument should not be interpreted to imply support for nonpartisan political systems, which have their own serious shortcomings (Key 1949, ch. 14). Nonetheless, it is striking that a generation of political scientists heavily influenced by economic theories of

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competition should have maintained a largely uncritical enthusiasm for strong political parties without taking account of a serious objection derived from those same theories.[12] While real, the informational benefit of parties is almost surely exaggerated by conventional wisdom.

Cues from Opinion Leaders

If the vast bulk of the electorate is ignorant, perhaps it can follow the lead of the knowledgeable minority of political activists—"opinion leaders." This line of argument is one of the most common in the literature on shortcuts (Popkin 1991 and 1993; Page and Shapiro 1992; Stimson 1990; Fiorina 1994; Converse 1990; Zaller 1992; Neumann 1986; Berelson et al. 1954; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Instead of keeping close track of issues themselves, voters can respond to "cues" issued by political activists of similar value orientations to themselves.

> What is important is that there are perhaps five percent [of voters] who are activists and news junkies who do play close attention. If they see that something is seriously wrong in the country, they sound the alarm and then ordinary people start paying attention. (W. Russell Neumann, quoted in Popkin 1991, 47)

Unfortunately, the strategy of following cues from opinion leaders creates at least as many difficulties for ignorant voters as it solves. Because of the immense asymmetry of information between leaders and followers and the low incentive of the latter to monitor the leaders' performance effectively, serious principal-agent problems will surely arise.[13] From the perspective of the principal, it is difficult to conceive of a more difficult principal-agent relationship than that between ignorant voters and highly knowledgeable, well-organized political activists.

Where voter interests and activist interests coincide closely, the difficulties of monitoring need not be so acute (Mansbridge 1980). But this state of affairs is far from being common. Political activists differ greatly from the general population on a wide range of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995); they also tend to be more extreme in their views (Neumann 1986; Palfrey and Poole 1987; Jennings 1992). Most important of all,

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opinion leaders acquire interests that diverge sharply from those of voters simply by virtue of becoming opinion leaders. As political activists, their power, prestige, social status, and opportunities for pecuniary gain will tend to rise with the perceived importance of their issue positions to the public; thus they have strong incentives to exaggerate the importance of political problems and to push for political solutions (or at least solutions with a prominent role for activists) in preference to private-sector ones. Even if voters are aware of these incentives for exaggeration and attempt to discount activist claims as a result, they have no way of knowing how *much* discounting is required.[14]

Even if there are opinion leaders whose interests do coincide with those of a given voter, that voter still faces an extraordinarily difficult problem in determining which ones they are. Since the whole point of relying on opinion leaders is to economize on information costs, the voter is unlikely to invest heavily in researching opinion leaders' qualifications. And, unlike the case of most private-sector specialist professionals, the voter cannot simply judge the quality of activists' performance by the results of the policies they advocate, since it is not usually possible to determine which social outcomes are the result of public policy without considerable substantive knowledge of the issues.

It is sometimes argued that voters can get around this problem by listening to opinion leaders of similar ethnic, class, or other background characteristics (Popkin 1991; Page and Shapiro 1992; Berelson et al. 1954). Yet deep divisions of interest between masses and political leaders are no less likely to exist within such groups than within society as a whole (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Sowell 1983; Horowitz 1985). Ethnic-group leaders, for example, often have clear incentives to exacerbate intergroup hostilities and exaggerate the importance of ethnic grievances relative to other issues (Sowell 1983).

Finally, political activists have strong incentives to reinforce the existing prejudices of their followers rather than presenting new information that might undermine simplistic preconceptions. Expressing unpopular views might damage the leader's position with his constituency (Loury 1994; Kuran 1995),[15] or even persuade it to ignore him altogether, since voters tend to seek out political information primarily from media sources of the same partisan alignment as their own and discuss political issues mainly with those who already agree with them (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1988).

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A successful strategy of following cues from opinion leaders requires voters first to decide which leaders' cues to follow and monitor these leaders in order to avoid the various principal-agent problems that are likely to arise. Neither of these tasks can be accomplished without considerable substantive voter knowledge of the issues. Without such knowledge, opinion leaders are as likely to be misleading as they are to be informative.

Retrospective Voting

The "retrospective voting" hypothesis holds that voters judge politicians by past performance rather than current promises. Although some scholars still claim that prospective voting better explains electoral behavior (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992), there is considerable evidence to suggest that retrospection explains at least a large part of the data on electoral outcomes and presidential popularity (Fiorina 1981; Norpoth 1996).

Does retrospective voting ameliorate public ignorance? The argument is advanced that "retrospective voting requires far less of the voter than prospective voting" (Fiorina 1981, 10; see also Key 1966, 60-61). But there are at least three reasons to doubt this conclusion. First, as noted above, it is often difficult for ignorant voters to determine which social outcomes are the result of public policy and which ones aren't. To take a prominent example in the literature, many models of electoral retrospection are based on "sociotropic" voting, in which voters make their decision based on the condition of the national economy rather than that of their own personal finances (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Kiewiet 1983). Yet a person ignorant of economics (sometimes even a trained economist) cannot tell whether economic conditions are the result of (1) the policy of the current government, (2) lagged effects of its predecessors' policies, or (3) factors completely independent of any government action. Even if (1) is the case, the voter may not be able to determine whether current conditions are positive or negative. For example, economic sacrifice in the present might be a necessary precondition for future progress. Second, even where the voter does know that a given outcome is the result of government policy, ignorance of the structure of government may make it difficult for him to decide which elected officials deserve credit or blame.[16] Under an American divided government

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or European coalition government, the voter may not even be able to tell which party is responsible. This defect is of particular importance for retrospective voting theory, which emphasizes that the electorate "passes judgment on leaders, not policies" (Fiorina 1981, 11), and thus implicitly assumes that voters know which leaders are responsible for what.

Finally, even where the voter knows both that a given outcome is the result of government policy and which leaders are responsible, this is still not quite enough to make an informed choice. The voter will also want to know whether the opposition party is likely to do better.

These criticisms of the informational adequacy of retrospective voting apply both to the "reward-punishment" model advanced by Key (1966) and the more forward-looking approach favored by Downs (1957, ch. 7) and Fiorina (1981), under which voters use a government's past performance as a predictor of the future. In both cases, the voter must first establish how good past performance has been, and it is not possible to do so without addressing the types of problems discussed here.

The retrospective voting argument does, however, possess a kernel of truth. As Fiorina (1981, 4) puts it, retrospective voting can impose a kind of "rough justice" on political leaders who have failed badly. If a policy failure is large, highly visible, and easily attributable to a particular set of leaders, it is certainly likely that they will be voted out of office, as the elections of 1932, 1952, and 1968 cited by Fiorina suggest.[17] Moreover, the bigger the failure, the less likely it is that the opposing party's performance will be worse. Unfortunately, the preconditions of magnitude, visibility, and easily traceable accountability rarely obtain in real life. Even in the case of a very large policy failure, leaders may escape blame if the full impact of the failure is not felt until after they are out of office anyway. Herbert Hoover and Harry Truman paid the price of perceived failure in 1932 and 1952 respectively, but their predecessors—who arguably had at least as much to do with many of the failures in question—did not.

Issue Publics: One-Eyed Men in the Land of the Blind

If voters cannot keep track of all the important issues, perhaps they can at least focus on a few that are of particular concern to them

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(Converse 1964). For instance, blacks are more likely than whites to be familiar with civil rights issues (Converse 1964; Iyengar 1990). In theory, such "issue publics" can make up for ignorance of more general policy issues within the electorate as a whole.

Attempts to confirm the issue-public hypothesis empirically show that it has only very limited validity. Knowledge of different aspects of public policy is highly intercorrelated (Neumann 1986; Smith 1989; Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 138–52). Even where significant differences in knowledge between groups do exist, this does not necessarily demonstrate that the knowledge of the better-informed group is adequate for informed voting; it shows only that members of that group know *more* about the issue than does the rest of the electorate. The difference is crucial, because most studies showing that issue publics are better informed about a particular issue than the rest of the electorate rely on surveys tapping only very basic knowledge. Iyengar's (1990) conclusion that blacks are more knowledgeable about civil rights than whites was based on three survey items asking respondents to identify Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP, and the term "affirmative action" (ibid., 183). It is not at all clear that a voter whose knowledge is limited to elementary facts of this sort can cast an informed vote on complex issues.

Even if the voter does have an adequate knowledge of the narrow issue of particular concern to him, informed voting with respect to that issue might still be inhibited by ignorance of the "rules of the game" of government policy (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 151). Using Iyengar's example, a black voter may have sufficient *specific* knowledge to conclude that current civil rights policy should be changed, but not enough *general* knowledge of the structure of government to determine which elected officials have to be voted out to do it. Even in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man cannot be a true king if kingship requires seeing things that can only be discerned with two eyes.

Voter ignorance also undercuts the utility of issue publics in two further, less obvious ways. First, the ignorant voter cannot readily tell which aspects of public policy really are part of the issue of interest. One of the neglected aspects of issue-public research is the question of how the scope of the relevant "issue" is defined in the first place. If the connection between two or more matters of public policy is nonobvious or is ignored by politicians and the media for their own reasons, voters may fail to pick it up.[18] Social Security reform, for in-

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stance, is almost never defined as a racial issue, yet the lower life expectancy of blacks, combined with the fact that they pay Social Security payroll taxes at the same rate as whites, has turned Social Security into a major hidden redistribution from black workers to white retirees (Ferrara and Goodman 1987). The subtlety of the connection, combined with collusive politicians' lack of incentive to focus on the issue, leads the relevant black issue public to ignore it. Such problems often prevent an issue public from ever forming to begin with. High knowledge costs combine with collective action problems to ensure that many potential issue publics are numbered among Mancur Olson's "'forgotten groups' who suffer in silence" (Olson 1965, 165).

Most fundamentally, voter ignorance of general issues may vitiate the benefits of issue publics even in situations where they have fully adequate information about their more specific concerns. If each specific issue area is controlled by a subset of the electorate with a special interest, while these same subsets remain ignorant of generally applicable issues, the outcome may well be a process of mutually destructive rent-seeking that leaves each group worse off than it would have been had there been no issue publics in the first place. Within its particular bailiwick, each issue public pushes for policies beneficial to itself without regard to the costs to others (costs of which its members are ignorant, even if self-interest would not lead them to ignore these costs in any case). A classic "tragedy of the commons" ensues in which the general interest is routinely neglected in favor of the particular.[19] For these reasons, it is by no means clear that an electorate divided into issue publics is in a better position to pursue its policy objectives than one that is uniformly ignorant across the board.

The "Miracle of Aggregation"[20]

It has often been claimed that if the ignorant portion of the electorate commits its errors randomly, the power of aggregation might cause these errors to cancel each other out. Where mistakes are truly random and the electorate sufficiently large, every "erroneous" vote for Candidate X should be offset by one for opposing Candidate Y. Only the nonrandomly distributed votes of the relatively informed voters will have a real impact on the outcome; that outcome will thereby be decided "as if" the electorate as a whole were informed

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(Grofman and Withers 1993; Page and Shapiro 1992; Converse 1990; Stimson 1990; Wittman 1996).

It is ironic that this line of argument should be put forward by writers committed to developing a defense of "majoritarian democracy" against charges of voter incapacity (Page and Shapiro 1992, ch. 10). Taken seriously, it implies that the votes of the vast majority of the electorate are just "noise" obscuring the "signals" sent by the informed few, as Converse (1990) explicitly states. If the argument is correct, elections would have the same outcome if only the ballots of the well-informed minority, which may be as small as 5 percent of the total (Neumann 1986), were counted. Why not disenfranchise the other 95 percent, then, just to be sure? Even in the more moderate version of the theory, which allows that some of the ill-informed votes nonetheless turn out to be "correctly" cast, a large proportion of the electorate is viewed as a source of random errors that fortunately offset each other (Page and Shapiro 1992). Regardless, the magic of aggregation can only work if (1) the errors *really are* random, and (2) the informed minority that decides electoral outcomes adequately represents the interests of the rest of the population. Overwhelming evidence suggests that neither precondition holds true.

One of the main reasons why errors are *non*randomly distributed is that voters really do try to use several of the other information shortcuts discussed above. As a result, ill-informed voters often draw nonrandom, misleading inferences about economic conditions and other issues (Mutz 1993; Holbrook and Garand 1996). Also, uncertainty about a candidate's policy stances creates a systematic bias in favor of incumbents whose positions are generally better known (Alvarez 1997). A recent attempt to test the random-distribution hypothesis on samples drawn from six recent presidential elections (1972–1992) found that, controlling for various background characteristics of voters, poor information produces an average aggregate bias of 5 percent in favor of the incumbent and 2 percent in favor of the Democratic candidate (Bartels 1996).[21] This study is by no means fully free of methodological problems, but at least as many of them point in the direction of underestimating nonrandom information effects as overestimating them.[22]

The random-distribution hypothesis fares little better in meeting the second precondition, that of the representativeness of the relatively well informed. The small minority of well-informed voters (no

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more than one-fifth of the total, and perhaps much less) differs systematically from the majority in gender, income, race, age, religion, ideology, and a host of other politically relevant attributes (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991 and 1996; Alvarez 1997; Neumann 1986; Converse 1964; Palfrey and Poole 1987). It would be remarkable indeed if the interests of this small, unrepresentative subset of the population coincided even roughly with those of the population at large, and there is little reason to believe that they do.

Overall, the shortcuts to informed voting discussed in the literature are far less helpful to voters than their advocates suggest. In many instances, they may be actively harmful. There is no real substitute for voters who are adequately informed at the individual level.

III. VOTER IGNORANCE AND THE MODERN STATE

The debate over voter ignorance has focused on how much voters know, but rarely on the question of how much government there is for them to know about. Yet it is clear that the greater the size and scope of government, the more voters have to know if they are to control its policies through the ballot.

In most advanced industrial democracies, government spending now constitutes at least a third and often more than half of GNP (IMF 1991; Mitchell 1992 and 1993). But it is not the size of government per se that so greatly increases the likelihood of voter ignorance as much as the extraordinary scope of government activity, for which size serves as a marker. A government that committed enormous resources to a narrow range of readily comprehensible activities would not necessarily be much more difficult for voters to keep track of than one that committed only small amounts to them. Yet the growth of government over the last century has corresponded to an immense expansion of the domain of government power as well (Higgs 1987). This process has reached the point where areas of social life outside that domain are arguably no longer the rule but the exception.

In the United States, the executive branch of the federal government alone has 14 cabinet-level departments, 57 independent regulatory agencies and government corporations, and four "quasi-official" agencies (Department of Commerce 1997). They range in function from the United States Information Agency to the Farm Credit Administration to the National Mediation Board. It is doubtful in the extreme that any voter could keep adequate track of all their activi-

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ties, even if she paid far more attention to political information than voters do today.

Current surveys of political knowledge do not ask about the functions of specific government agencies, instead opting for questions about rudimentary aspects of government structure and opinions about whether government should do "more" in broadly defined issue areas such as "education" or "helping the poor."[23] The omissions may stem from researchers' reluctance to use questions that may prove intimidating to ill-informed voters. The few questions requiring more detailed issue knowledge that have found their way into surveys unsurprisingly show even greater levels of ignorance than those about elementary information (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 91-93).

The Ignorance of Elites

Traditional research on voter ignorance questions the electoral competence of ordinary citizens (Lippman 1922; Schumpeter 1950; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964). But focusing on the relationship of ignorance to the size and scope of government leads us to question the competence of relatively well-informed elites as well. It is unlikely that even professional social scientists have more than a very superficial knowledge of the activities of government agencies outside their areas of specialized expertise, if indeed they have heard of them at all.[24]

Researchers tend to assume, usually without argument, that the best-informed voters can make effective use of ideology and opinion leaders to guide their choices. Yet it is not at all clear that this optimism about elites is justified. Let us consider the dilemmas the modern state creates for generally well-informed voters who nonetheless remain ignorant of specific issues.

The ideologically sophisticated voter who is convinced that *some* government program can address a given evil must still determine whether the programs proposed by candidates really are the ones that are likely to do the trick. Unless voters hold to an ideological position that justifies government activism for its own sake, regardless of the results, they must find a way to ensure that the programs put in place by legislators really do serve the purposes they intend. The difficulty is further exacerbated in those very common situations where voters cannot readily observe the policy's effects (Mayhew 1974).

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Even those most favorably disposed toward government activism cannot deny the possibility that government programs may fail in their stated purposes because of unanticipated consequences or because they are actually driven by rent-seeking interest groups. Many programs justified rhetorically by the need to aid the poor or provide some public good for the population at large actually serve well-positioned "distributional coalitions" at the expense of the very people whom the policies are intended to help (Olson 1982). And it is a commonplace among specialists that well-intentioned interventions such as minimum wages and drug prohibition often produce side effects that may be worse than the original problem.

Presumably, ideologically sophisticated elites have a greater capacity than do ordinary voters to overcome these difficulties by following opinion leaders with specific knowledge about particular issues. Yet even here, voter ignorance of details may lead to principal-agent problems similar to those that beset the electorate as a whole. Moreover, the sheer scope of the modern state makes it difficult for even the well informed to find and keep track of knowledgeable opinion leaders to guide their choices over the full range of important matters under government control.

The relative paucity of research on the control of modern-size governments by well-informed, ideologically sophisticated voters prevents any definitive conclusions in this area.[25] In part, the lack of research of this type is itself a consequence of the growth of government, since that growth has greatly reduced the proportion of the electorate that is well-informed, diminishing its chances of exerting control over the state.[26] Nonetheless, there are strong reasons to believe that even a well-informed electorate, one where the average level of knowledge is equal to that of the top 5 to 10 percent today, would have great difficulty imposing its will on a government as broad in scope as modern states tend to be.

Informational Advantages of Limited Government

A government with strictly limited powers might reduce the problem of public ignorance by reducing the number of issues to be decided by government to a level voters would find more manageable. Obviously, issues taken out of the government sphere would have to be "decided" in other ways, whether through market exchanges or other

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nonpolitical processes. Whatever their other defects, however, these mechanisms are relatively free of the collective action problems that induce massive voter ignorance in the political sphere (see Part IV below). The desirability of democratic control over government is not, of course, the only consideration that must be taken into account in determining the proper scope of the public sector. Nonetheless, any such calculation should at least consider the tradeoff between increased statism and democracy.

Is there *any* evidence that limited government eases the informational burden on voters and enables them to exercise greater control than they do today? Nineteenth-century American history suggests that the answer may be yes.

Because of the very limited powers of the national government, nineteenth-century national politics revolved around a small set of relatively narrowly defined issues, including the spread of slavery, the disposition of newly acquired Western lands, the tariff, federal support for infrastructure spending, banking, and, on a few occasions, warfare with foreign powers. Leaving aside obvious overlaps between issues (e.g., slavery and Western lands), rarely were more than two or three of these matters in contention at any given time.

The theory developed here predicts that this limitation of government power should have allowed voters to focus on those issues that did enter the electoral agenda in much greater detail than has been possible in the twentieth century. While there have as yet been no systematic tests of this prediction, considerable evidence supports it. During major nineteenth-century controversies such as the debates over monetary policy in the 1830s and 1890s, the ongoing battle over the tariff, and the confrontation over the expansion of slavery in the 1850s, politicians presented for mass consumption far more sophisticated arguments than prevail in electoral politics today.

The Lincoln-Douglas debates over the expansion of slavery—conducted before large audiences of ordinary voters, including a substantial proportion of illiterates—addressed in some detail such questions as the effect of slavery expansion on free labor, whether or not the Supreme Court's interpretation of the Constitution necessarily takes precedence over that of other branches of government, the moral status of blacks implicit in the Declaration of Independence, and the true meaning of "popular sovereignty" (Angle 1991; Jaffa 1959). Campaign speeches of this complexity would be unimaginable today, and the rise of television is unlikely to be an adequate explanation of the

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difference.[27] Moreover, the Republican Party developed—again for popular as well as elite consumption—a complex ideology linking the slavery issue to a general theory of the role of free labor in society, while Southerners countered with an equally sophisticated view of slavery as a "positive good" (Foner 1970; Gienapp 1987). Similarly, during the struggles over banking in the 1830s and 1890s and during various conflicts over tariffs throughout the century, popular awareness of even these seemingly esoteric issues was apparently quite high (Tocqueville [1837] 1969, 242–44, 388–89; Remini 1966; Pessen 1969; Schlesinger 1948; Goodwyn 1978; Higgs 1987, ch. 5).

Popular ideological awareness also played an important role in restraining the growth of government beyond its prescribed bounds. Indeed, this factor was singled out as the most important force limiting the power of the U.S. government by leading foreign observers such as Tocqueville ([1837] 1969, 164–65, 262–63) and Lord Bryce (1895, vol. 2, 369, 536–37). Several more recent treatments of the subject also emphasize the crucial role of popular ideological consensus in restraining the growth of nineteenth-century American government in the face of interest-group pressure (North 1981, chs. 5, 14; Higgs 1987, ch. 5; Weingast 1993 and 1995, 14–15, 18–21; Anderson and Hill 1980). Such a high degree of ideological awareness is in clear contrast to what we know of modern voters.

This nineteenth-century evidence by no means amounts to a strong test of my hypothesis and is, of course, subject to alternative explanations. Even so, it provides a prima facie case for the proposition that voter knowledge and control of government policy will be much greater under a regime of strictly limited government power.

The relationship between voter ignorance and big government leads us to question the informational adequacy of even the best-informed voters under such a government. It also leads to the counterintuitive suggestion that the extension of government power to new areas of social life undercuts democratization rather than furthers it. Democratic control of government may increase when there is less government to control.

IV. IGNORANCE AND RATIONALITY

Perhaps the most fundamental cause of ignorance resides in the collective action problem created by the insignificance of any individual vote in determining an electoral outcome (Downs 1957, chs. 11–14;

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Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Since one vote is almost certain not to be decisive, even a voter who cares greatly about the outcome has almost no incentive to invest heavily in acquiring sufficient knowledge to make an informed choice. An informed electorate is a public good, the provision of which is subject to the collective-action problem that arises when consumers of a good do not have to help pay for its provision in order to enjoy its benefits (Olson 1965; Hardin 1982). Only political professionals and those who value political knowledge for its own sake have an incentive to acquire significant amounts of it.

An important extension of the Downsian logic is that it applies just as readily to highly altruistic and civic-minded citizens as to narrowly self-interested ones.[28] Even a perfectly altruistic person—someone who always chooses to prioritize the welfare of others over his own whenever the two conflict—would not rationally devote much of his time to acquiring political information for the sake of casting an informed vote. No matter how great the benefits to others of a "correct" electoral outcome, our altruist's ballot has almost no chance of bringing it about, since in a large electorate the chance that his vote will be decisive is vanishingly small (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). The rational altruist would therefore seek to serve others in ways where a marginal individual contribution has a real chance of making a difference to their welfare, such as contributing to charity.[29] By spending time and effort on becoming an educated voter, the altruist actually *diminishes* others' welfare by depriving them of the services he might have conferred on them through alternative uses of the same resources.[30]

The applicability of the collective-action argument to altruistic voters obviates—at least in this case—one of the standard criticisms of economic models of politics: that they rest on unwarranted assumptions of self-interested behavior (Barry 1970; Udehn 1996; Lewin 1991). The prediction of rational voter ignorance rests on no such assumption.[31] The conclusion that even altruists have little incentive to become informed voters also casts a pall on the proposals of political theorists to improve the functioning of democracy by raising the level of civic-mindedness (Sandel 1996; Gutmann 1987; Gutmann and Thompson 1996). Whatever virtues these proposals might have, they seem unlikely to dissipate the rational ignorance that stands as a particularly imposing obstacle to effective democratic control of government.

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The collective-action-problem explanation of political ignorance has other important implications for efforts to realize the democratic ideal of voter control. Proposals to alleviate ignorance by increasing the availability of political information to the public (Patterson 1993; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, ch. 7; Dahl 1989, 338–41) run afoul of the collective-action problems and lack of entertainment interest that prevent most citizens from seeking out the vast amounts of information available already. Likewise, suggestions that there is a large pent-up demand for political information that newspapers and TV networks could tap by making various alterations in their formats (Graber 1994; Patterson 1993) should be viewed with skepticism in light of the failure of past efforts along these lines (Neumann 1986, 134–39).

A notable shortcoming of the collective-action explanation of voter ignorance is that it seems inconsistent with the fact that voters vote at all. As has often been pointed out (e.g., Barry 1970; Udehn 1996; Green and Shapiro 1994; Fiorina 1990), rational-choice models of politics apparently predict that all or most voters shouldn't even show up at the ballot box, given the infinitesimal likelihood of affecting the electoral outcome. More precisely, such models predict non-voting unless the "duty-based" or "expressive" utility of voting outweighs its costs (Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Barry 1970; Brennan and Lomasky 1985). If that is the case, however, it is possible that the same sense of duty that leads voters to vote may also lead them to become informed.

A complete discussion of this issue, the "paradox of voting," would take us far afield, but there are at least three important reasons to believe that the paradox does not invalidate a collective action problem explanation of voter ignorance.[32] First, it is possible that the unexpectedly high incidence of voting is simply the result of people overestimating the potential impact of their vote (Moe 1980, 31–32).[33] Polls show that over 70 percent of voters believe that their individual votes "really matter" (Teixeira 1992, 56). Such overestimation may in fact be *rational* to the extent that acquiring an accurate knowledge of the impact of voting may, for many, be more expensive than the relatively minimal effort required to vote in major elections.[34] If so, it is not implausible to hypothesize that the degree of overestimation is great enough to stimulate voting, but far too small to stimulate the much greater investment of time and effort necessary to acquire a substantial amount of political information.[35]

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Second, even if—as is surely true at least in part—the critics of rational choice are correct and voting really is explainable by the "expressive utility" of voting or by irrational[36] conceptions of duty, it is still possible (and, empirical evidence suggests, very likely) that such motives are not powerful enough to induce voters to pay the heavy costs of becoming well informed. This point dovetails with our third argument: that none of the competitors of the Downsian explanation predict the stability of extreme levels of ignorance across major differences in societal levels of educational attainment and national culture.[37] Surely explanations of voter ignorance based on cultural differences, different levels of commitment to duty, and varying access to information would predict greater variation in levels of ignorance across time and place than seems actually to exist.

In sum, the rational-ignorance hypothesis is only an imperfect representation of reality. Yet to the extent that it has even some validity, it sets severe limits to the amount of knowledge ordinary voters are likely to be willing to acquire. Any solution to the problem of voter ignorance will have to work within these constraints rather than try to break them.

V. DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND CONSERVATIVE MAJORITARIANISM

This section considers the implications of the argument developed thus far for two important schools of thought in contemporary political theory: deliberative democracy and what I call "conservative majoritarianism." As we shall see, these seemingly disparate normative theories of politics have in common a fatal neglect of the problem of rational voter ignorance.

Deliberative Democracy

Advocates of deliberative democracy distinguish their theory from traditional pluralist conceptions of democracy by insisting that a legitimately democratic law must not only be adopted by duly elected representatives of an informed electorate, but must also be adopted for the right "type of reasons" (Bohannon 1996, 25). The "naked preferences" of electoral majorities are not enough to justify legislative outcomes (Sunstein 1984; idem 1993, 25–29, 133–45). Deliberative de-

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mocrats differ among themselves as to the correct principles of legitimation, but they agree that these principles require more of voters than a simple desire to promote their own preferences, regardless of content. Thus, Jürgen Habermas urges that the deliberative process take account only of citizen arguments based on "impartiality" and incorporating the "mutual recognition of competent subjects" (Habermas 1990, 75–76, 100). Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson insist that deliberative reasons must pass the tests of reciprocity, publicity, and accountability. Reciprocity, in their conception, requires that "citizens . . . appeal to reasons that are recognizably moral in form and mutually acceptable in content," and that they appeal only to such empirical claims as "are consistent with relatively reliable methods of inquiry" (1996, 57–58). These requirements are, they conclude, sufficiently rigorous to exclude many if not most religious appeals, and even the argument that restrictions on private property violate individual liberty (ibid., 58, 69–71). Voters are, moreover, required not merely to register their impartial preferences at the polls, but actively to engage in a "dialogue" with each other, making arguments constrained by the limiting principles of deliberation (Michelman 1988; Habermas 1990; Cohen 1991; Gutmann and Thompson 1996).

Even more traditional liberal political theorists such as John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin have adopted ideas similar to those of the deliberative democrats. Rawls (1993, ch. 6; 1997) insists that citizens deliberating and voting on matters of "constitutional essentials" (government structure and certain fundamental rights) refrain from appealing to "comprehensive religious and political doctrines" over which there may be fundamental disagreements; they should instead confine themselves to reasons "justifiable to all citizens." [38] Rawls (1997, 77a) would, for example, exclude appeals to the value of "monogamy as such" as a consideration in the state's family policy because it reflects "a religious or comprehensive moral doctrine." Dworkin (1978, 234–37) would not allow public policy to be based on "external preferences"—preferences related to concern for or hostility to people other than oneself—and would throw out all justifications for public policy based on religion (Dworkin 1993).

At the risk of overgeneralization, deliberative democrats generally set two limiting conditions on the types of reasons that count as legitimate: some conception of reasonability as opposed to "naked preference," and some notion of reciprocity or respect for one's fellow

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citizens. To these are added the proviso that policies must be the result of deliberation rather than the mere registering of voters' preferences at the polls. If these limits are to restrict political outcomes in any meaningful way, they end up imposing knowledge burdens on voters *over and above* those required by the minimal version of the democratic ideal sketched out in part I. In order to be able to influence policy, deliberative voters would have to know not only which policies will promote their preferences and how the candidates stand in relation to them, but also how to frame their position so as not to violate the restrictions on legitimate reasons required by deliberative democratic theory. Judging by the complexity of the theorists' arguments over the definition and application of these restrictions (e.g., Gutmann and Thompson 1996), the knowledge burden involved is likely to be quite substantial.

To be sure, the problem could be avoided if the restrictions in question are interpeted as being merely pro forma. A "public interest" rationale of some sort can be constructed for almost any policy. But a merely pro forma enforcement of the restrictions would undercut the ability of deliberative democracy to exclude illegitimate purposes from the formation of public policy, presumably its main justification in the first place. It is therefore rejected by most thinkers in this tradition (e.g., Sunstein 1993; Rawls 1993, ch. 6).

An alternative solution is that of Seyla Benhabib (1996, 79), who advocates a "discourse model" of deliberative democracy that, "although it presupposes that participants must recognize one another's entitlement to moral respect and reciprocity in some sense," would make "the determination of the precise content and extent of these principles . . . a consequence of discourses themselves." This proposal risks making the concept of deliberative democracy meaningless by defining its contours as the product of a "discourse" that itself has no clear definition. Nothing in Benhabib's framework ensures that "the precise content and extent of the principles" will be any different from that of standard pluralist democracy, or indeed dictatorship.

Any concept of deliberative democracy that simultaneously seeks to maintain voter control of government and to produce policy outcomes significantly different from those of other forms of democracy necessarily imposes a substantial additional knowledge burden. It is thus lamentable that deliberative democrats have generally overlooked the widespread ignorance that prevents most voters from achieving

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even the more modest levels of political knowledge required by traditional pluralist conceptions of democratic control.

Most deliberative democrats advocate a public sector even larger than that which exists today (e.g., Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Bohannon 1996). They recognize that socioeconomic inequalities and racial and gender discrimination may stop some citizens from participating in the deliberative process, and they advocate extensive welfare-state and affirmative-action programs as remedies (Gutmann 1987; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Bohannon 1996). These solutions leave much to be desired, since they ignore the extensive ignorance prevalent even among white male middle-class voters. The persistence of a relatively constant level of ignorance in the face of rising affluence and educational attainment (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991 and 1996; Smith 1989) strongly suggests that socioeconomic deprivation is not the only, or even the principal, cause of voter ignorance.

Furthermore, by significantly extending the size of the public sector, the new programs proposed by deliberative democrats might actually exacerbate the problem of rational ignorance. This possibility has been virtually ignored by deliberativists, who tend to view such policies as an unproblematic extension of democracy to new areas of social life. Failing to see that the roots of deliberative incapacity reside more in voter ignorance than social inequality, deliberative democrats end up proposing cures that arguably would spread the disease.

Some deliberative democrats actually deny that voter knowledge is a serious issue. "Give people some significant power," writes Benjamin Barber (1984, 234), "and they will quickly appreciate the need for knowledge." Carlos Nino (1996, 155–56), goes so far as to assert that "the time and effort necessary to vote in a thinking manner are not so excessive as to impede people in developing their plans of life or pursuing personal matters."[39]

An exception to the general neglect of rational voter ignorance among deliberative democrats is the work of James Fishkin (1991 and 1997), who does at least recognize the problem, although not the possible link between ignorance and activist government. As a partial solution, he proposes the "deliberative poll," an election-year conference of a statistically representative group of voters who are presented with information on the issues by experts and given an opportunity to discuss them in small groups over a period of a few days. This exercise could be televised so as to give the vast bulk of voters a picture

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of how they themselves would deliberate if presented with adequate information and time for reflection.[40]

Unfortunately, Fishkin's evidence from experiments in Britain and the United States does not show that a few days of reading and discussion can overcome a lifetime of ignorance even for the immediate participants in the poll (Fishkin 1997, appendices). He is able to prove only that participants changed their minds on a number of issues, an outcome as easily explicable by the "agenda-setting" and "priming" effects of presenting new information to the ignorant (Iyengar and Kinder 1987) as by an increase in knowledge sufficient to create true informational adequacy. More importantly, Fishkin provides no proof that television viewers—the real targets of the exercise—are actually willing to watch the televised deliberative poll and assimilate the information presented in sufficiently large numbers to have any real electoral impact.[41]

A final line of defense that deliberative democrats could offer is that their theory is merely an ideal against which existing political institutions must be judged, rather than a fully implementable political program. On this conception, deliberativism becomes merely a goal that can be approached incrementally, even if never entirely achieved. The problem with this response is that unless the problem of voter ignorance is somehow resolved, any movement to set deliberative constraints on policy outcomes necessarily also constitutes a strengthening of elite dominance by those who possess the necessary knowledge and skill to be effective in the deliberative process. The more deliberative skill is required to achieve a policy outcome, the greater the extent of that dominance will be. A "cynic," notes Richard Epstein (1988, 1642), might even conclude that political theorists endorse deliberative democracy "because it gives skilled academics a comparative advantage." The problem of voter ignorance creates a deep contradiction between the "deliberative" and "democratic" elements in deliberative democracy.[42]

Conservative Majoritarianism

Arising as a response to liberal judicial activism, what I choose to call "conservative majoritarianism" is akin to deliberative democracy in ignoring the deleterious consequences of voter ignorance. The theory is "conservative" both in the sense that most of its adherents are

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on the political right and in the sense that it gives great deference to status-quo voter preferences and political institutions. Conservative majoritarians such as Robert Bork (1979 and 1990), Lord Devlin (1965), Raoul Berger (1977), and Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia and William Rehnquist argue that democratically elected legislatures should have sweeping discretionary power in establishing public policy. The fundamental reason given for this conclusion is that these legislatures possess "democratic legitimacy" (Bork 1990, 2). Unelected judges should not be allowed to create "new disabilities for democratic government" (Bork 1979, 697). In some tension with this majoritarianism is the parallel insistence of many of its proponents that courts follow the "original intent" of the Constitution, which arguably contains many countermajoritarian elements (Macedo 1987; Siegan 1980). Conservative originalists get around this difficulty through the simple expedient of interpreting original intent in such a way as to minimize the scope of constitutional restrictions on legislative dominance (Bork 1979 and 1990; Berger 1977); Lino Graglia (1996, 719) claims, implausibly, that "the constitution wisely places few restrictions on representative self-government and elected representatives . . . are rarely tempted to violate them."

Ultimately, conservative majoritarianism falls prey to the same weakness that we find in deliberative democracy: the implicit assumption that legislation meaningfully reflects "the will of the people" even in the presence of extreme voter ignorance. By favoring a largely unconstrained domain of power for the "political branches" of government, majoritarians also echo the deliberative democrats in compounding the problem of ignorance by allowing government to grow large enough to make voter monitoring impossible. Conservative majoritarians tend to be more suspicious of activist government than are deliberative democrats, but their political thought places no significant restraints on the legislative power through which the modern state has become entrenched and continues, periodically, to expand.

In theory, conservative majoritarians are defenders not of legislative supremacy per se, but only of the proposition that legislatures are more democratic than an unelected judiciary. Their argument derives much of its resonance from a general assumption that majoritarian elections are superior to other sources of authority. But if an "activist" court is able to help reduce the scope of legislative power to the point where the information burden on voters be-

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comes more manageable, the resulting political system might actually be more democratic than one in which legislative power reigns supreme. By this logic, the pre-New Deal Supreme Court—reviled as antidemocratic by liberal and most conservative legal scholars alike (e.g., Tribe 1988; Bork 1990)—may actually have helped to promote democracy through its efforts to limit the scope of government power.[43]

The argument developed here does not, of course, provide any definitive resolution of the question of the proper boundary between legislative and judicial power. The courts may be unwilling or unable to constrain the power of government,[44] and there may be reasons to support unconstrained legislative supremacy that do not depend on the claim that such supremacy is democratic. Nonetheless, the present analysis at least casts serious doubt on what, for many, is the most compelling reason to endorse untrammeled legislative power as a basic principle of a constitutional order.

VI. DEMOCRACY AND THE SCOPE OF GOVERNMENT

I have argued that voter ignorance is widespread in advanced industrial democracies, that it is a rational result of collective action problems, that it cannot be circumvented through various "information shortcuts," and that it is greatly exacerbated by the size and scope of modern government. On the basis of these conclusions, I have further argued that the problem of voter ignorance undercuts two highly influential schools of thought in modern political theory: deliberative democracy and conservative majoritarianism.

Concern for the consequences of voter ignorance is not a new idea in Western political thought. For Plato, in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic,* it was one of the principal reasons for rejecting democracy entirely. Aristotle (*Politics* III) sought to resolve the difficulty by limiting the exercise of political power solely to those who possessed sufficient reason, knowledge, and virtue to rule the state in accordance with the purpose of pursuing the good. Even so staunch a liberal democrat as John Stuart Mill ([1861] 1958) sought to offset the impact of ignorance by means of his famous proposal to allocate extra votes to the educated. Modern democratic thought, however, has tended to sweep the problem under the rug even as the growth of government has made it increasingly severe. Ultimately, however, liberal democrats

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cannot avoid the prima facie contradiction between big government and democracy.

To say that the contradiction must be faced is not to say that it must necessarily be resolved in favor of democracy. Democracy is not the only criterion for good government, and perhaps not even the most important one. Nonetheless, the dilemma is particularly acute for those who see democratic self-government as an important value in its own right (e.g., Barber 1984; Pateman 1970). It is also quite serious for those democrats whose emphasis on deliberation places an even greater knowledge burden on voters than do more modest versions of democratic theory. Even for those who see democracy as a purely instrumental value—for instance, to the achievement of social justice—the strong likelihood of elite dominance over most policy issues in a democracy with largely unconstrained government power should raise troubling questions. Are our elites really so benevolent and so knowledgeable that they will serve the interests of the poor and downtrodden even in the absence of effective voter control?

The concern here is not the traditional fear that elites can deviously manipulate public opinion to suit their own advantage (Ginsberg 1986; Zaller 1992), although this possibility cannot be ruled out. It is rather that elites end up in control of policy simply by default. What the voters don't know about, they can't meaningfully control. This fear is not greatly eased by recent studies suggesting that policy outcomes roughly correspond to general trends in public opinion (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Jacobs 1993). Even if the correlation is real rather than spurious, it fails to rule out the possibility that elites and their policies are responsible for changes in mass opinion rather than vice versa. It also does not show that the elites responsible for administering the policies in question did not do so in a way that serves their own interests or those of powerful interest groups at the expense of the population at large. Finally, it does not show that *whoever* originated the polices—elites or populace—understood the issues at hand well enough to achieve the desired result.

A possible response to the argument of this article is simply to scale down the ambitions of democracy from effective voter control of public policy to the mere ability of voters to change rulers when they so choose (Schumpeter 1950; Riker 1982). This is indeed an important advantage of democracy in situations where incumbent officials

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have committed a massive and highly visible policy error. But while this advantage is a point in favor of democracy as against dictatorship or oligarchy, it says nothing about the merits of majoritarianism as compared to a democratic government with strictly limited powers. The ability to remove a failed leader is of little use in that vast majority of cases in which the electorate cannot readily tell whether a given leader has failed or not.

The argument presented in this paper does not provide any definitive answer as to how limited the powers of government should be, even from the narrow standpoint of assuring meaningful voter control over public policy. Nonetheless, the depth and apparent intractability of current levels of ignorance strongly suggest that democratic control requires a government far more limited in scope than what we have today.

A second limitation of my analysis is the lack of comparison to knowledge problems encountered by consumers in the private-sector markets that would replace many government functions if the latter were to be restricted. If private knowledge problems are as great as public ones, the argument for limiting government power would be weakened. It is sometimes argued that the problem of voter ignorance is little more than a manifestation of a more general reality of modern society in which no one can know everything (Schattschneider 1960, 132–34). A full analysis of this subject is beyond the scope of this paper, yet there are powerful theoretical reasons to believe that consumer ignorance is both less prevalent and less serious a problem than voter ignorance. Among the more important of these are the absence of collective action-induced rational ignorance in most product markets; the relative ease of connecting product quality to product performance, compared to the great difficulty of linking social outcomes to public policy (Schumpeter 1950); the greater ease of finding disinterested advice on market transactions (e.g., financial advisers, consumer guides); and the existence of enforceable contract and tort remedies against deception by product manufacturers of a sort that are unavailable against deceptive politicians. Analysts since Walter Lippman (1922) and Joseph Schumpeter (1950, ch. 20) have repeatedly noted that most citizens are far more knowledgeable about their private affairs than about politics. The political realm also lacks a conveyor of information as efficient in providing feedback and reducing information costs as the market's price system (Hayek 1945; Schumpeter 1950).

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Yet even if the situation is closer to parity than such considerations suggest, the monopolistic nature of the state and the great powers concentrated in its hands should still lead us to place a particularly high value on democratic control over government. At a bare minimum, the problem of voter ignorance and its connection to activist government should be taken more seriously in political thought than has recently been the case.

NOTES

1. See Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996 for a survey of the field.
2. In principle, this caveat is merely a logical extension of the Michigan group's second condition, that voters have a position on the issue at hand; however, it is important to recognize that that position must be *informed*.
3. Other studies suggest that Americans are less knowledgeable than Western Europeans about foreign affairs, that they are more knowledgeable about some aspects of domestic politics, and that they understand less about the workings of Congress than Britons and Canadians do about their parliaments (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 89–91; Almond and Verba 1963). Such differences are likely explainable by the relatively greater importance of foreign affairs to the less-isolated European nations, and by the much simpler (and thus more readily comprehensible) structure of Westminster-style legislative systems as compared to that of the United States.
4. Tellingly, Feldman's (1988) test of the explanatory significance for voting decisions of people's "core beliefs" in individualism, equality of opportunity, and free enterprise find the last to be the only one that is statistically insignificant in its impact. It is also, of course, the only one of the three with determinate policy implications, since there is sharp and legitimate disagreement over the best ways to promote individualism and equal opportunity.
5. The recent works of Page and Shapiro (1992) and Popkin (1991 and 1993) particularly exemplify this problem. I discount the significance of Page and Shapiro's assertion that they "take little comfort" from the fact that individual-level ignorance is rational (1992, 14) because, in the very next paragraph, they make much of the conclusion that public opinion is rational and stable in the aggregate.
6. Professor Fiorina has pointed out to me that he would modify this sentence if he could rewrite it today (personal communication). I quote it nonetheless, not to criticize him, but because it represents a widespread view among scholars and politically minded intellectuals more generally.
7. Aldrich is, however, a bit too optimistic in his interpretation of his data. For instance, it is striking that the electorate seems to have made such errors as viewing Nixon in 1972 as more conservative overall than Ford in 1976, Bush in 1988, or even Reagan in 1980, despite Nixon's extensive liberal initiatives

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in both domestic and foreign policy. On the Democratic side, Jimmy Carter (1976, 1980), Walter Mondale (1984), and Michael Dukakis (1988) were all perceived as approximately equally liberal, an assessment unlikely to be endorsed by knowledgeable insiders. This assessment (Aldrich 1995, 173) is based on Aldrich's averaging of the data on specific issue areas rather than on the specific ideology measure, which is less likely to be informative given the public's apparent inability to think in ideological terms.

8. An example of the latter phenomenon is the "political business cycle," on which see Nordhaus 1975 and Tufte 1978.
9. For example, an American voter who has been a mature adult for 20 years as of 1999 will have experienced two Democratic and two Republican presidential administrations since achieving political awareness.
10. As yet, however, there has been no systematic study of the frequency and durability of this phenomenon.
11. Antislavery activists were well aware of the cartel and routinely denounced the alliance between Northern and Southern political elites that brought it about—"the lords of the lash and the lords of the loom," in Charles Sumner's phrase (quoted in Filler 1960, 244).
12. See Burnham 1970, Schlesinger 1985, Aldrich 1995, and Sundquist 1988 for representative statements of the conventional wisdom in favor of parties. Aldrich (1995, 128–29) describes the Van Buren cartel in some detail without alluding to its negative implications for the more general case for parties.
13. See Moe 1984 for a review of applications of principal-agent theory to political science.
14. This difficulty lies at the heart of Adolf Hitler's famous insight that the skillful political leader can fool the public by telling "big lies." The rationally ignorant voter is unlikely to discount the big lie enough to fully offset its effects.
15. As Loury 1994 insightfully argues, even an individual closely affiliated with a particular group will hesitate to express opinions contrary to those strongly held by group members, since adherence to these views may itself be seen as a "litmus test" of loyalty to the group.
16. See part I for a summary of the evidence that voters are ignorant of government structure.
17. Even here, scholars continue to argue about whether or not Hoover's policies in 1932 and Truman's in 1952 really were so clearly inferior to those of their partisan opponents as conventional wisdom at the time suggested.
18. Research by Iyengar and Kinder (1987) suggests that poorly informed voters are very vulnerable to the "priming" effect of the media when it defines the relevant context of a particular issue.
19. See Buchanan, Tullock, and Tollison (1980) for a general exposition of the theory of rent-seeking.
20. The phrase is taken from Converse 1990, 383.
21. The reasons for the pro-Democratic bias are unclear.
22. Several factors point to underestimation. First, the use of presidential rather

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than congressional or state elections focuses on a subset of elections where the candidates and their issue positions are particularly prominent. Second, Bartels compared the votes of less-informed voters to those cast by voters rated "highly informed" rather than to any absolute standard of information. Third, the data used necessarily cannot measure the effects of the absence of issues that may be kept out of the campaign entirely because they are too difficult to present to ill-informed voters. Cutting the other way is the fact that Bartels controlled for demographic, ethnic, and income characteristics of voters but not for interest-group membership and other more fine-grained factors. It is possible that some of the difference between the voting patterns of the well informed and the rest of the electorate is due to differences in interest and ideology between the two groups that are not incorporated into Bartels's model.

23. See Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996 and Page and Shapiro 1992 for extensive examples of these two types of questions.
24. This writer had never heard of 25 of the 61 non-Cabinet-level agencies listed in the *Government Manual* before reading it for this article.
25. There is, of course, no shortage of theoretical models of government populated by perfectly informed voters. But they are of limited applicability to situations where voters are poorly informed about specific issues but have a strong general ideological awareness.
26. This point does not contradict my earlier statement that the level of ignorance has not diminished over time. The studies I cited (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991; Smith 1989) show that the amount of knowledge possessed by the average voter has increased only modestly, if at all. A constant level of knowledge combined with the increasing amount of material that one has to learn to be truly knowledgeable (as a result of the growth of government) leads to a net increase in ignorance relative to what one needs to know to vote in an informed manner. For example, if in 1940, informed voting required a knowledge level of 10, while in 1990 it required a level of 20, then a voter possessing 5 units of information in 1940 and 6 in 1990 would be relatively more ignorant in 1990.
27. For a strong argument that the impact of television on politics has been greatly overestimated, see Neumann 1986.
28. See Olson 1965, 64–65, for an application of this point to collective action problems in general.
29. Assuming that the charity produces a nonpublic good or, alternatively, a public good to which each marginal contribution makes at least a modestly significant independent impact. See Hardin 1982, 55–61, for a discussion of "step good" collective-action problems—situations where the good can only be produced if there is a minimum total contribution to provision.
30. Empirical evidence provides some support for this conjecture. Americans spend some 3 percent of their income on charity (McKenzie 1992), very likely a far greater proportion of their wealth than the proportion of their time that—judging by survey evidence of the results—individual voters

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spend on acquiring political information. Similarly, participation in nonpolitical civic organizations is far greater than in political ones, despite the fact that most citizens recognize the importance of public policy to both their own interests and public welfare (Schlozman and Verba 1995).

31. In principle, of course, the altruist might combine commitment to social welfare with a gross misestimation of the likely impact of his vote. But it is implausible to believe that the same individual could be simultaneously well informed about the criteria for making a choice in the voting booth and extremely ill informed about the likely impact of his vote; at the very least the widespread existence of such strangely selective ignorance remains to be proven.
32. For a more thorough discussion of the paradox of voting and its relationship to rational choice, see Aldrich 1993. Aldrich's argument that voter turnout is a poor test of collective action theory because the expected costs and benefits on each side are so small is a useful complement to the arguments I develop in the text.
33. For the explanation to work, it is not necessary that *all* voting be explained by it, merely a substantial part.
34. Personal experience in trying to explain the paradox of voting to nonspecialists provides a degree of additional support for this conjecture.
35. This argument is not necessarily falsified by the well-established result that the educated, who are presumably more likely to understand the paradox of voting, are also more likely to vote (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Because educated people know more about politics, they may be more confident of voting the "right" way, and this tiny increment in instrumental utility on the part of educated voters with a poor understanding of the paradox (who may well be a great majority even of this group) may be enough to overwhelm increased nonvoting on the part of those who, because of education, understand it well. Furthermore, educated people are, in the very process of being educated, likely to be exposed to more propaganda about the importance of voting than their less-educated peers, and this may actually increase the extent of their misconception. Obviously, however, these arguments are merely conjectures and await empirical testing.
36. Such conceptions are "irrational" only in the sense that the individual voter's fulfillment of his duty does not in fact succeed in helping his compatriots.
37. See the discussion of the international and intertemporal persistence of ignorance above.
38. He adds that adherence to this standard of "public reason" is "highly desirable" even on nonessential matters, though perhaps not morally obligatory (Rawls 1993, 215).
39. These writers also wrongly claim that collective-action problems pose little difficulty for their theories because they only arise among narrowly self-interested people (Barber 1984, 179; Nino 1996, 136).
40. See Fishkin 1997, ch. 5, and appendices, for a more detailed description.
41. For instance, Fishkin (1997) provides no evidence to show that the delibera-

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tive polls he and his associates conducted and televised during the 1996 U.S. presidential election and the 1997 British general election had any significant impact on any voters other than those who directly participated.

42. For a discussion of other aspects of the contradiction, see Berkowitz 1996.
43. This criticism of conservative majoritarianism has a certain affinity with John Hart Ely's (1980) argument that an activist judiciary can be consistent with democracy if it limits itself to "representation-reinforcing" decisions that defend the principle of one man-one vote and ensure the rights of "underrepresented" minorities. Yet it goes far beyond Ely in insisting that voters must not only be able to cast ballots and escape certain types of discrimination, but also have a real opportunity to control the exercise of power by government.
44. Rosenberg 1991 makes a strong case for the proposition that courts lack the leverage necessary to force major changes in public policy.

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Tom Hoffman

RATIONALITY RECONCEIVED: THE MASS ELECTORATE AND DEMOCRATIC THEORY

ABSTRACT: *Early voting behavior research confronted liberal democratic theory with the average American citizen's meager ability to think politically. Since then, several lines of analysis have tried to vindicate the mass electorate. Most recently, some researchers have attempted to reconceptualize the political reasoning process by viewing it in the aggregate, while others describe individuals as effective—albeit inarticulate—employers of cognitive shortcuts. While mass publics may, in these ways, be described as "rational," they still fail to meet the basic requirements of democratic theory.*

Largely as a response to evidence gathered in the 1950s and 1960s that demonstrated the lack of sophistication (or political rationality)[1] of the American voter, new forms of political rationality have been posited in an attempt to vindicate the reasoning capacities of the *demos*. By viewing political rationality as an aggregate or collective phenomenon and, alternatively, by viewing rationality as less rigorous or deliberative and, thus, as compatible with ignorance of most political information, recent researchers[2] have proclaimed the American public to be rational after all. But since these approaches reconceptualize the standards against which the electorate is assessed by redefining political rationality, leaving intact the empirical evidence of mas-

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sive public ignorance, they should prompt us to ask whether the newly posited forms of rationality are good enough to meet the normative demands of democratic theory. It is one thing to relabel an ignorant electorate as "rational." It is another to show that such "rationality" fulfills the role assigned to reason by democratic theory.

Exactly what prompted the expectation that citizens should exhibit a certain level of political rationality in the first place? Does the "reconceptualized reason" of newer researchers adequately meet these expectations? And should it? Many political theorists, even those within political science departments,[3] express little interest in addressing these questions, generated as they are by empirical research.[4] But there is actually fertile ground for political theorists here—not only in reflecting on the contemporary significance of empirical evidence of public ignorance, but in sorting out its relationship to the Western tradition of political thought. Contrary to the assumption of some analysts,[5] there is no single "classical" democratic theory. Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro (1993, 95) are surely correct when they note that "democratic theories of various sorts ask various things of the citizenry."

Despite this diversity, it can be affirmed that important and highly influential strands of democratic thought conflict with the new notions of political rationality. Here I will focus on a small number of democratic theories that are prominent in modern liberal thought. (Because of the vast number of sometimes mutually contradictory theories of democracy, I leave aside those that are most distant from attempts to justify contemporary, liberal democracies).[6] After briefly sketching out a typology of the several strands of contemporary liberal democratic thought, I will indicate how the reconceptualized notions of political reason pose problems for each of them.

In a nutshell, my view is that political rationality has been reconceived so as to allow its compatibility with a sort of intellectual division of political labor, but that this reconception does not reconcile this division of labor with liberal democratic ideals.

"Rationality" has been revised along two related lines. First, such public-opinion researchers as Page and Shapiro (1992 and 1993) and Erickson et al. (forthcoming) have looked at political reason as an aggregate or collective characteristic. In this view, the electorate as a whole can be judged rational or not, regardless of the rational status of any of its individual members. Second, a large political-psychology literature has emphasized the use by individual voters of cognitive

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shortcuts or rules of thumb in dealing with a political environment about which they are largely uninformed. For the purposes of this paper, Samuel Popkin's *The Reasoning Voter* will stand for this literature, because he deliberately seeks to use it to vindicate the rational status of the electorate. This second revision essentially views political reason as an inarticulate or unselfconscious phenomenon. People who use shortcuts in reasoning about the political world typically are unable to explain their reasons for acting one way or another.

The two lines of revision are related, in that both imply an intellectual division of labor. In the first view, ignorant individuals cancel each other out in the aggregate, freeing public opinion for leadership by relatively well-informed elites. In the second view, many of the cognitive shortcuts used by individual voters rely upon signals from opinion leaders or (especially in Zaller 1992) cues from party leaders. The question is whether aggregate and shortcut forms of rationality meet the demands of democratic theory.

The Anxieties of Mass Political Society

Empirical studies that began in the middle of the century used relatively new survey techniques and statistical methods to show that the typical American voter is largely uninformed about politics, inconsistent in her political values, unreflective about politics, and only weakly motivated to participate in it. This research, carried out at Columbia University (e.g., Berelson et al. 1954) and then at the University of Michigan (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960) seemed to confirm longstanding worries about the feasibility of authentic democratic governance in the context of modern, mass society. While the normative ideals of democratic governance and democratic citizenship had achieved by mid-century a kind of worldwide hegemony,[7] the new evidence strengthened the hand of those who warned that these ideals were unrealistic at best, and it supported the view that democratic theory required radical revision in order to accommodate democratic reality.

Worries about the potential instability and irrationality of democratic publics, of course, were common long before "democracy" acquired a positive connotation. While it is popular to characterize the American founders, for example, as motivated by self-interested elitism (e.g., Beard 1913), it is probably fairer to say that their well-

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known suspicion of democracy was based at least as much on intuitive insights into characteristics of large electorates that would have to wait two centuries to be empirically confirmed. Suspicions about the widespread tendency to view politics through unreflective and inflexible group-based identifications (termed "factions" before the advent of sociology) and a concern about the instability of public opinion and its susceptibility to manipulation animate many of the *Federalist Papers*. Like many Enlightenment thinkers, the American founders took an experimental approach to politics. But because of their fears, one experiment they stepped back from conducting—at least intentionally—was that of initiating the first mass democracy.

When the gradual expansion of suffrage in the United States and Great Britain threatened to bring about mass democracy anyway, theorists such as John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville responded with institutional and cultural recommendations aimed at ensuring that public decision making would be broadly consistent in its aims, realistic and informed in its choice of means, moderate, and flexible. To these ends, Mill—the same theorist who inspires often radically egalitarian participatory or developmental democratic theorists—argued in *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) for an electoral system that would be weighted in favor of the most highly educated voters. Meanwhile, Tocqueville cast about for cultural and institutional mechanisms that would push citizens to remain engaged in decision-making processes and to practice their deliberative skills in policy debates that would be both practical and abstract. Hence his identification of the importance of jury duty and engagement in local civic organizations.

Two commentators who more directly influenced postwar empirical researchers were Walter Lippmann and Joseph Schumpeter. Lippmann argued that the mass public understands political issues, which are necessarily remote from everyday experience, only in terms of "stereotypes." To Lippmann, decisions made on the basis of such stereotypes are irrational because they correspond only very crudely to reality ([1922] 1949, pt. III). Political rationality essentially involves the acquisition of an accurate, fine-grained mental picture of the political world. An individual is more rational vis-à-vis some policy when his understanding captures enough of the complexity and nuance of the relevant circumstances to render accurate judgments about them.

Schumpeter anticipated many of the arguments of Anthony

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Downs (1957) and other rational-choice scholars in his elaboration of the basic insight that the individual tends to think in unrealistic terms about things distant from her daily experiences. Mass politics requires the members of the public to make decisions that they are ill equipped to make.

> Normally, the great political questions take their place in the psychic economy of the typical citizen with those leisure-hour interests that have not attained the rank of hobbies and with the subjects of irresponsible conversation. Things seem so far off. . . . One feels oneself to be moving in a fictitious world. (Schumpeter [1942] 1976, 261)

Because of the unreality of the political world and the typical citizen's correct perception that his vote has little or no ultimate effect on decision-making, due to the sheer size of the electorate, he is likely to expend "less disciplined effort on mastering a political problem," according to Schumpeter, "than he expends on a game of bridge" (ibid. 261).

Schumpeter's analysis was driven by his belief that the liberal-capitalist order was destined to be superseded by some form of socialism. He wanted to demonstrate that a realistic form of socialism could be made compatible with a realistic conception of democracy: one that relied on the public only to choose from among competing elites, and not to rule directly. But Schumpeter's re-examination of the capabilities of the mass electorate was also motivated by the rise of fascist movements in Europe. Because the typical democratic citizen has an unrealistic view of the distant political world, and because she lacks the motivation to expend cognitive energy on political matters even *if* these matters were somehow to become more accessible, she is, Schumpeter argued, vulnerable to emotional—even infantile—appeals. Thus, he warned that due to the "weakness of the rational processes he applies to politics," the everyday citizen likely would suffer from a tendency to "relax his usual moral standards . . . and occasionally give in to dark urges which the conditions of private life help him repress" (ibid., 262). Similarly, Philip E. Converse's classic essay on the lack of political sophistication among non-elites, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (1964), concludes with a section examining the mass basis for the Nazi Party, as if to underline the possibly dire consequences of his empirical findings. The rise of Hitler's party, he notes, followed on the heels of a surge of new, unso-

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phisticated individuals into the German electorate; the "mass base [of the Nazi party] was disproportionately recruited from among customary non-voters, the young and the peasantry" (Converse 1964, 253). But the overall theme of his essay is that—new entrants or not—the great bulk of any large electorate is likely to think in a quite rudimentary and inconsistent way (if at all) about politics. Only a thin crust of elites will seriously reflect on its political beliefs. This tiny, sophisticated stratum is competent to make informed political decisions in a way that the bulk of the public is not.

Inspired by similar anxieties, the German emigré sociologist Theodor Adorno had, in the immediate postwar years, led a survey-based study of populations drawn from selected U.S. cities, on which he and his colleagues based *The Authoritarian Personality.* This study was devised to identify "the *potentially fascistic* individual, one whose structure is such as to render him particularly susceptible to anti-democratic propaganda" ([1950] 1964, 1; emphasis original). Although it had less impact on future empirical work, it illustrates the demanding nature of the Frankfurt school's view of rationality, despite an orientation toward *autonomous* decision making that is quite different from the previously considered theorists' focus on *well-informed* decision making.

The matter of political rationality is addressed most directly (it is implicit in the entire work) in *The Authoritanian Personality*'s discussion of "cognitive personality organization" (ibid., 461). A battery of questions intended to tap into cognitive personality are meant to track six dimensions that the authors take to delineate the irrational personality: (1) rigidity; (2) intolerance of ambiguity; (3) pseudoscientific or antiscientific (as vs. a scientific-naturalist) orientation; (4) anti-intraceptive (as vs. self-critical) thinking; (5) suggestibility or gullibility (as vs. autonomy); and (6) an unrealistic view of means-ends relationships. Those who are relatively less rigid in their thinking distinguish themselves by a "readiness to think over matters and to come to a solution through their own thinking as well as their unwillingness to take over traditional and fixed concepts and ideas without scrutiny" ([1950] 1964, 463). Thus, the first and fifth criteria relate political rationality to autonomous reasoning. On the other hand, criteria (2), (3), (4), and (6) have to do with well-informed reasoning. This is fairly obvious for the third and sixth criteria. As for the second, the acceptance of ambiguity might be related to Lippmann's concern about the mass public's use of simplistic stereotypes. And intraceptiv-

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ity (criterion 4) is defined as a rational tendency "toward introspection, as well as a readiness toward gaining insights into psychological and social mechanisms" (ibid., 466).

Adhering to the six elements of *The Authoritarian Personality*'s notion of "cognitive personality organization" is clearly a demanding—i.e., resource-costly—exercise. Like Mill, Tocqueville, Lippmann, and Schumpeter, Adorno et al. take "rationality" to mean more than just efficient decision making. They require that people's political goals not be "infantile"—that is, motivated by pure passion and unsusceptible to critical examination and potential revision. By contrast, the rational-choice perspective inaugurated by Anthony Downs in *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957) takes the point of view of making the most effective use of the personal resources of the individual actor. This "instrumental" understanding of rationality is the classic economic view, which sets aside any concern about where the individual derives her ends or about the content of those ends. A strictly economic model of rationality is, essentially, relativistic. It does not question the wisdom of the ends pursued, only the appropriateness or efficiency of the means.

Broader, more traditional notions of *political* reason, however, imply more than just an individual's consideration of available means and their compatiblity with furthering a given set of preferences. They imply a thicker moral content. Political reason involves not only means-ends calculations, but the consideration of how preferences come to be held and a weighing of those preferences' compatibility with broader normative (i.e., social and cooperative) requirements. Politics is an inherently collective, cooperative phenomenon. The political as process excludes—by definition—coercion, manipulation, and indoctrination, relying instead on compliance with modes of persuasion and bargaining. The implicit or explicit association of Nazism with political irrationality in the work of Schumpeter, Adorno, and Converse suggests conceptions of political reason that involve judgments about how preferences, and policies intended to further those preferences, come to be held, as well as about the effectiveness of those policies in furthering given goals. Such conceptions do not take the individual's resource efficiency as the sole benchmark; instead they equate rationality with some larger good.

What such commentators as Lippmann and Schumpeter are worried about is that in a mass democracy, individual rationality may conflict with *political* rationality, conceived of as effective decision making consistent with the norms of politics. It may not, indeed probably will not,

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be cost-effective for any particular individual in a mass democracy to meet the demanding requirements of political reason. Indeed, this is Downs's ultimate message as well. But, probably because of Downs's misleading usage of "rationality," Campbell et al. (1960) and Converse (1964) refrain from using the term "rationality" when discussing the empirical evidence of the mass electorate's political incompetence. Both of these Michigan-school works can, nevertheless, be seen as investigations of the public's capacity to make or contribute to politically rational decisions. If Tocqueville, at the dawn of mass democracy, had sought out institutions by which the typical citizen might maintain adequate engagement with the political system, the Michigan-school researchers, from the vantage point of the mid-twentieth century, produced empirical evidence that such efforts had failed miserably.

According to Campbell et al. (1960, ch. 10), less than 4 percent of American voters organized their thinking about politics in ideological terms. A large proportion (45 percent) approached politics in a rigid manner, through identification of political issues in terms of simple group interests. Significant numbers of others seemed to have no real coherent organizing scheme for holding political information, let alone for reflecting on their political views in the self-critical way recommended by Adorno et al. Converse also showed that the typical (that is, non-elite) American held political values in an apparently ad-hoc way. She appeared to have no clear rank-ordering of political values or beliefs—no "centrality" to her belief system—by which to systematically adjust to new information or events. With no real rhyme or reason to their understanding of the political world, Converse noted, it was no surprise that the same people who expressed support for "familiar principles of freedom, democracy and tolerance" (1964, 230) had been found by other researchers (McClosky 1964; Prothro and Grigg 1960) to apply those values inconsistently when confronted with specific scenarios.[8]

Responses to Pessimism

Since the 1960s, several distinct[9] strategies have been adopted in an attempt to rescue the rationality of the American (and, by implication, the modern) electorate. Figure 1 is intended to show, in brief, how one might group the array of responses that followed on the heels of works like Converse's (1964).

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Figure 1. Array of Responses to the Unsophisticated Mass Public

Response 1: Empirical Evidence (Potentially) Time- or Context-Specific; Ideal of Rationality Accepted

1A—Radical and Utopian Variants:

The ideal of rationality contained in democratic theory is a prescriptive ideal, not intended to be descriptive. Thus, descriptive, empirical findings say nothing to democratic theory. Implicit (except in unabashedly utopian variants): the ideal of democratic rationality could be at least approximated, given radical political reform. (E.g., Duncan and Lukes 1963; Pateman 1970.)

1B—Non-Radical Variants:

When the times or political context change (and such changes have actually occurred or are likely), the electorate can display higher degrees of "ideal rationality." Empirical portrait of electorate as non-reasoning was true only for particular era. Examination of evidence from 1930s or 1960s would contradict the image of a non-reasoning electorate. (Eg., Key 1966; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976.)

Response 2: Empirical Evidence Flawed; Ideal of Rationality Accepted (or Unquestioned)

Measurement errors of some sort alleged. (E.g., Achen 1975; Brown 1970; Pierce and Ross 1974.)

Response 3: Empirical Evidence Accepted (or Unquestioned); Ideal of Rationality Rejected or Modified

Democratic Theory has wrongly conceptualized political reason, because:

3a—Political rationality must be understood as a collective phenomenon. The individualistic conception of reasoning is flawed. (E.g., Page and Shapiro 1992; Erickson, Mackuen, and Stimson, forthcoming.)

3b—Individual political reasoning does not display "global" coherence, but follows rules of thumb. (Constraint or ideology are not necessary elements of political reason.) (E.g., Popkin 1991.)

Response 1 accepts the Columbia and Michigan findings as (to some degree) empirically valid, but holds that they are historically specific, not necessary features of democracy. Those normative political theorists who were even aware of them tended to brush aside the findings of the Michigan school by arguing that rigorous versions of citizen sophistica-

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tion or rationality should be understood as prescriptive ideals, not descriptive claims. The fact that the mid-century American electorate did not live up to these ideals did not imply that democratic theory should be revised or made more "realistic"; it merely meant that we should try to bring reality more in line with the ideals.

The implication here is that, with the right reforms and institutions, most of the electorate could, in principle at least, hold sophisticated and realistic systems of belief about the political world in which they live. In this spirit, Carole Pateman (1970) called for institutions of workplace democracy (she held up as a model the Yugoslavian system of worker self-management) that would have meant a radical revision of the capitalist order.

Another variant of this response (1B in Figure 1) was less idealistic, but in a sense more optimistic about the potential of the existing political system. Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1976), for example, argued that the Michigan-school findings, though accurate to some degree, were based on surveys conducted during a particularly quiescent period of U.S. history and that, by the 1960s, changing times had changed the American voter without the need for institutional reforms.

As well, a number of empirical studies (e.g., Achen 1975; Pierce and Ross 1974; Brown 1970)[10] argued that measurement error was at the heart of the Michigan school's bleak findings. This is the most optimistic conceivable response (number 2 in Figure 1), but it applies only, if at all, to the most extreme formulation of these findings: Converse's characterization of public ignorance and disengagement as so extreme that much of the public could not be said to have "attitudes" about many political issues at all.

Defining Rationality Down

In both Berelson et al. (1954) and Schumpeter ([1942] 1976) we see hints of an idea that, I believe, forms the basis for the other main line of response to findings of public ignorance. This response (number 3 in Figure 1), on which I shall focus, tries to vindicate the mass electorate by reconceptualizing reason.

Schumpeter ([1942] 1976, 259), for example, muses in a footnote that

> rationality of thought and rationality of action are two different things. Rationality of thought does not always guarantee rationality of action.

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> And the latter may be present without any conscious deliberation and irrespective of any ability to formulate the rationale of one's action correctly. The observer, particularly the observer who uses interview and questionnaire methods, often overlooks this and hence acquires an exaggerated idea of the importance of irrationality in behavior.

Schumpeter is unclear about exactly what he means by his distinction between thought and action (this brief aside is the extent of his discussion of the matter), but rationality of action may correspond to some subsequently developed ideas about individual citizens' use of on-line processing, opinion leaders (or "two-step information flows"), and other techniques of the cognitive miser. The idea was that through the use of such techniques, citizens react in a complex and successful way to the political environment, while appearing (to survey questioners) to be entirely ignorant because, as Schumpeter says, they are not be able to "formulate the rationale" of their actions. Thus, their actions are rational and properly responsive even though their minds are largely devoid of political content. Popkin (1991, 7) similarly argues for a kind of "rationality of action" of this type in which

> people use shortcuts which incorporate much political information; they triangulate and validate their opinions in conversations with people they trust and according to the opinions of national figures whose judgments and positions they have come to know . . . [in the process] learn[ing] to 'read' politicians and their positions.

Since this kind of practical or "gut" reasoning is what voters really rely upon, "assessing voters by civics exams misses the many things that voters do know, and the many ways in which they can do without the facts that the civics tradition assumes they should know" (ibid., 20).

Similarly, Berelson et al., on the heels of showing that "in any rigorous or narrow sense the voters are not highly rational" (1954, 310), make brief note of a "paradox":

> *Individual voters* today seem unable to satisfy the requirements for a democratic system of government outlined by political theorists. But the *system of democracy* does meet certain requirements for a going political organization. The individual members may not meet all the standards, but the whole nevertheless survives and grows. This suggests that where the classic theory is defective is in its concentration on the *individual citizen*. What are undervalued are certain collective properties

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> that reside in the electorate as a whole and in the political and social system in which it functions. (Ibid., 312)

This passage anticipates recent work that appeals to aggregate studies of "collective rationality." Both Page and Shapiro 1992 and Erickson, MacKuen, and Stimson (forthcoming) take an approach of this kind. The mechanism here is that of aggregation (often called the "magic of aggregation"), through which the random decisions of the majority—those uninformed by sophistication—"cancel each other out," effectively leaving the decisions of the minority of politically rational citizens to guide the electorate's responsiveness to objective events.[11]

According to this work (forthcoming, 10.3), other, associated mechanisms work to reinforce the positive effects of aggregation. Erickson, MacKuen, and Stimson contend that not only does the aggregation process allow the informed to steer the whole, but that

> the interactions between the ignorant and the knowledgeable—in both juries and electorate—make aggregation more exponential than additive. As thoughtful argument meets the vacuous, in daily conversation and in elite debate, the thoughtfulness gains weight with each repetition.

This auxiliary argument relies on the assumption that "the truth will out," and that the eventually victorious arguments in the so-called marketplace of ideas will be those that are most competent rather than those that are most saleable to the mass public. In other words, it assumes the ultimate failure of demagoguery.

The parallel mechanism for Page and Shapiro (1993, 42)—one that they say may be "even more important" than the refining process of aggregation in producing rational political outcomes—is "the social formation of preference through collective deliberation." This process works through an intellectual division of labor aided by elaborate systems of social communication.

The mechanisms Popkin (1991) underscores, particularly the shortcut methods of relying on issue publics and trusted authorities, overlap with Page and Shapiro's idea of an intellectual division of labor, and with Erickson et al.'s argument about the superior influence of informed opinion in day-to-day interactions. Such analysts as Popkin, who argue that individual members of the electorate are effective low-information reasoners, are drawing a picture of social decision making in which the end products of some individuals' information processing

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are used by others. Some people do the cognitive work, and others pass on the fruits of that work to the masses who, in turn, use them in forming their opinions. All of these, as far as I can discern, are variations on the same basic theme.[12] Similarly, Russell Hanson posits a political division of labor in regard to toleration (which is not, however, equivalent to political rationality). "Political elites," Hanson (1993, 285) writes,

> undoubtedly play a crucial role in this process [of preserving democracy through toleration], and there is a well-established line of empirical research on the different political interests and capacities of masses and elites as they bear on tolerance. The most interesting conclusion of this approach is that democracy does not depend on the existence of high levels of tolerance among the masses. So long as elites defend against intolerance, a democratic system may persist and even function smoothly in spite of intolerant attitudes among the masses.

But only Page and Shapiro seriously entertain the idea that this kind of division of labor leaves open the potential for manipulation. "Our argument," as they frankly note, "is entirely consistent with the possibility that misinformation or misleading interpretations may be provided and the rational public deceived" (1993, 42). Those aspects of political rationality that help insulate the individual from propaganda or demagoguery and that allow for critical feedback—functions emphasized in studies such as those of Adorno et al.—are no longer present when political rationality is merely collective. A division of labor in which a rational minority influences an unsophisticated minority seems to obviate this earlier notion, as far as the majority is concerned.[13] How, then, can the division-of-labor idea be made compatible with normative democratic theory?

Strains of Democratic Theory

Since Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America*, the scholarly literature in American political culture has revolved around whether certain liberal ideals—specifically those of John Locke—have been hegemonic in the United States. Going even farther, Barry Holden's recent study of the genealogy and conceptual basis of liberal democracy contends that Locke had a profound influence on Anglo-American democratic theory above and beyond any specific influence his ideas may have had on the political culture of the United States (Holden 1988).

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Figure 2. Normative Strains within Liberal Democratic Theory

	Democratic Theories		
	Morally Grounded	Protective	Developmental
Consent View of Citizenship	e.g., Liberal Institutionalism	e.g., Madisonian Democracy	e.g., Liberal Privatism
Active View of Citizenship	e.g., Communicative Democracy	e.g., Jeffersonian Democracy	e.g., Participatory Democracy

I rely on Holden's understanding of democratic theory here because he organizes its various strands in a way that is particularly convenient for the purposes of considering the role of mass decision making. The basic conceptual structure from which I draw the typology of liberal democracy shown in Figure 2 is derived from his work. Some of Holden's terminology can unfortunately be a bit misleading, though, and so I take the liberty of recasting many of his labels for clarity's sake.[14]

Essentially, as Holden (1988, ch. 2) tells it, Locke's influence on liberal democracy takes the form of two "poles" or ends of a continuum which specify the proper role for the citizenry in a democracy. These two poles I call the "active view" and the "consent" view (see left-hand column of Figure 2). The consent view of democracy is inspired by Locke's notion of the ultimate consent of the people. Holden (ibid., 55) explains:

> Where consent is required for the performance of some action(s), those who give or withhold that consent can be seen as playing a decisive but negative role—"decisive" because their decision is necessary before the action(s) can be performed; "negative" because they merely respond to initiatives put to them by someone else.

This conception of the citizenry's role is likely to be much more congenial to the idea of a political division of labor, whether between government officials and all citizens, or between opinion leaders and nonelites. In general, the "consent" view of democracy is less taxing than

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the other, "active" view of democracy also inspired by Locke. It demands less of any individual citizen's cognitive resources.

The active view of democracy carries with it a "richer" conception of the people's role. In this view, deficiencies in individual-level competence or political sophistication are serious challenges to democratic legitimacy. "In effect," Holden says, "Locke's right of revolt is here developed into a positive initiating role for the people. Rather than the people merely responding to initiatives put to them by the governors (actual or potential) . . . it is the governors who respond to initiatives from the people" (1988, 56–57). Although Locke himself favored only the occasional exercise of such initiative, his right to revolt gave birth to an ideal of routine political engagement favored by many later liberals.

These two different conceptions of the role of the electorate can be seen as cross-cutting the successive theories of democracy developed in the Anglo-American world. The three main theories discussed by Holden are reproduced in Figure 2. "Morally grounded" theories are justified by the claim that some aspect of democracy is *intrinsically* necessary for the expression of a basic moral good, such as natural law or moral (e.g., Kantian) law. What I have termed "protective" democratic theory views democracy as instrumental to the protection of some other moral good that is not intrinsically bound up with the operation of democracy itself (e.g., utility or welfare). Finally, "developmental" theories see democracy as necessary for the proper development or "true flowering" of the individual citizen.

In truth, nearly all democratic theories are a complex mixture of elements of the typology presented in Figure 2. There are very few—if any—"pure" theories that match the schema precisely. However, certain prominent names and schools of thought are readily associated with the three major types of democratic theory.

Under the protective theory of democracy, the possibility of elite manipulation must be a major concern, depending on what a particular theory of this type identifies as a core "interest" worth protecting, and depending on what level of engagement in politics is required to protect those interests effectively. In Figure 2, for example, idealized versions of Madisonian and Jeffersonian democratic theories are included under the "protective" heading to indicate that both these theories are concerned (among other things) with protecting against tyranny, although they differ in the degree of direct citizen involvement they suppose this goal requires.

Reconceived notions of political rationality might also run into trou-

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ble with developmental theories of democracy if any degree of political sophistication is considered a core part of the individual's developmental potential. It is true that if—as under so-called liberal privatist theories—the capacities of the individual to be developed are largely nonpolitical (e.g., personal expression or the capacity for fulfilling personal relationships), then public ignorance is not a crucial problem. Civic republican thought (e.g., Sandel 1996), on the other hand, generally holds that the development of the individual's political capacities is central

"Moral basis" theories include a wide range of views, so it is impossible to speak in the abstract about whether a theory of this sort will conflict with a notion of political rationality based on a division of labor. By the terms of one particularly prominent democratic theory of this sort today, however—Kantianism—the top-heavy distribution of political competence that emerges from the empirical studies of public opinion would almost certainly be found lacking. Even a moderate theory of democracy based on Kantian thought is likely to find reconceived notions of political rationality inadequate.

For example, in *The Rule of the Many*, Thomas Christiano explicitly sets out to reconcile the Kantian demand for equal recognition and respect of persons with the structural realities of modern mass society. Because he tries to keep the level of commitment demanded from individual citizens reasonable, and because he recognizes that a widespread division of labor is necessary to maintain or improve material living standards, Christiano retreats from the typically very demanding conception of citizen rationality implicit in most other Kantian theories, such as that of Jürgen Habermas (1990), who envisions an ideal speech situation of universal and unlimited citizen deliberation.

At the heart of Kantian moral philosophy is the argument that equal concern and respect are due to individuals because of their status as rational beings. The individual's reason—the fact that all reasoners share in a common "community" of the rational—entitles them to the most basic moral rights, and upon these, the political rights of legal or political communities are founded.[15]

Christiano argues that a coherent Kantian view can accept a citizenry that delegates major political roles to specialists. Specifically, his theory allows citizens to relinquish the role of reasoning politically about the proper *means* to achieve policy goals. They can also step away from the task of deliberating over the political compromises that must be made in the course of the democratic policy-making process. In these respects, Christiano's view tracks the realities of mass politics, as

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revealed in the public-opinion literature. Christiano, however, argues that all citizens in a properly Kantian democracy must, at a minimum, be able and willing to engage in reasoning about the ultimate political ends of the society, and that their reasoning—to be consistent with the values of Kantian univeralism—must center around the interests of the whole society, not narrow self-interest. Reasoning about the political ends to be pursued cannot be delegated by the individual because in doing so, she would renounce the very feature of herself that justifies her rights in the first place. On the terms of this prescriptive theory, then, merely aggregate or collective political rationality remains insufficient to the extent that people's political "preferences" regarding ends originate in the cumulative influence of elite-driven political discourse. For instance, John Zaller's seminal study of *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* suggests that elite influence may be responsible for the content of public preferences about ends, so there is little reason to expect these aggregate preferences, no matter how stable, to meet the demands of a Kantian democratic theory (see esp. Zaller 1992, 310–11, and Friedman 1993).

* * *

Because of my concern to discuss ideas of political rationality in terms of several democratic perspectives, I have merely suggested some of the likely points of tension between these views and the idea of an aggregate political rationality. A more conclusive treatment would require, instead of breadth, the juxtaposition of one particular democratic theory against the reconceptualizations of political reason that emanate from public-opinion research.

The present analysis, though, leads to the tenative conclusion that the most obviously pressing normative concern raised by the picture of public "rationality" drawn by public-opinion researchers is the possibilities of elite influence in the establishment of the basic aims of the political system. Thus far, besides Page and Shapiro's (1993) simple acknowledgment of the possibility, the political analysts who have tried to vindicate the rationality of the electorate have not properly explored this potentially very troubling aspect of the evidence.

However, the new[16] conceptions of political reasoning may amount to an important corrective to those forms of democratic theory with which they conflict most deeply. In particular, Kantian demands for the expression of rationality by the individual might be scrutinized more thoroughly in light of the division of political labor. This, more than

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anything, is what separates the electorate into two broad groups: informed and politically sophisticated elites and disengaged, potentially irrational masses.[17] Democratic theories suited to contemporary societies must confront this division of labor as a given to some degree. What that degree should be, however, is a large issue with which contemporary democratic theorists must wrestle.

NOTES

1. I will argue shortly that—contrary to some analysts (e.g., Smith 1989)—the concept of the electorate's "sophistication" amounts to much the same thing as its capability to reason politically. For the moment, it should simply be understood that I am using reason and its cognates in a somewhat different sense than that used by Downs (1957). Downs is concerned with resource efficiency, or being *economically* rational. *Political* rationality in the sense that I use it in this paper stipulates that the end of the reasoning process be a satisfactory political decision, however that be defined.
2. Page and Shapiro 1992, Popkin 1991, and Erickson, MacKuen and Stimson (forthcoming) are just a few of the more prominent works that are part of this broader "trend."
3. Disciplinary historian John Gunnell (1993) has gone so far as to argue that the subdiscipline of political theory has systematically sought to establish itself as an "autonomous" endeavor within political science, preoccupied by its own research agenda and its own unique methods of discourse, and in large part oblivious to the research agendas pursued around it. According to Gunnell, the very identity of the subdiscipline has, since the "behavioral revolution" in political science in the 1960s, been based to a great degree on eschewing any concern with actual politics or with the methods of science. "By the end of the 1980s," according to Gunnell, "the principle conversations in political theory ceased to speak about actual politics, let alone to it [and] . . . even when an aspect of political theory had a distinct practical-issue counterpart and constituency, it was difficult to resist the attachment to the tokens of academic authority and the siren of esotericism and to speak in a manner that was not opaque to all outside the academy or even those standing outside the specialized language of the subdiscipline" (ibid., 277).
4. One notable and refreshing exception is a recent book produced with the explicit mission of bringing together the work of "the two camps"—"empiricists" and "theorists"—within political science so as to gain an enriched perspective on mass democracy (Hanson and Marcus 1993, 25–29). But many of the contributions to this volume are allied with the effort I have referred to as the reconceptualization of political reason.
5. See, for example, Schumpeter's ([1942] 1976, chap. 21) discussion of "The Classical Doctrine of Democracy." Pateman (1970, chap. 1) nicely analyzes the way

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Schumpeter and other so-called "elitist" theorists of democracy have propagated the idea of a monolithic "classical" or "traditional" democratic theory.

6. One could easily bring into the discussion an overwhelming number of democratic theories by seeking to include a wider range, including Marxist theories (e.g., Macpherson 1973; Harrington 1972), nationalist-fascist ones (Schmitt [1923] 1992), or others in between.
7. The widespread use of the designation "democratic" by political systems (both authoritarian and non-authoritarian) in the twentieth century and its power to legitimize various practices and systems attests to its dominant position as a political ideal among modern populations.
8. Intolerance is not inherently inconsistent, of course, and is not even properly understood as undemocratic in a simple, straightforward way. Hanson (1993, 273–78) rightly points out that it is too often assumed to be so by social-science researchers. At some level the philosophy of liberal democracy itself demands a refusal to tolerate *some* kinds of political acts. However, if respondents indicate a support for general principles of tolerance (of such things as basic minority rights) and then refuse to apply them in specific cases, there is a problem with logical consistency. Conover and Feldman (1980) term this kind of belief consistency "vertical" constraint: a consistency between general political orientations and more specific political beliefs.
9. By "distinct" I mean analytically so. In truth, some appraisals of electorate sophistication might combine more than one of these strategies. Thus my discussion here, depicted in Figure 1, should be understood as a representative simplification of sorts.
10. See also Smith 1989 for a critical examination of many other studies taking this broad approach.
11. In an odd way, this may be the public-opinion equivalent of the old classical economist's "invisible hand" argument for the marketplace. Both envision orderly outcomes resulting from a large number of unintended/unconscious actions. There are differences, however. In the economists' argument, each of the individual actors are conscious, they simply do not *intend* to promote the general welfare in the way that they are alleged to do so efficiently. And in the case of political aggregation, *some* people (the ultimately decisive set of informed citizens) are acting in a directly intentional way. It is just their less-informed peers who are "unconscious," so to speak.
12. As is, I think, the general picture of mass opinion formation presented in Zaller 1992.
13. In a concluding chapter, Zaller (1992) indicates how such a division of cognitive political labor can work without elite manipulation taking place, but this happy situation, as he notes, depends on the satisfaction of a set of preconditions of which some seem unlikely to hold in many circumstances.
14. For instance, Holden describes one strain of liberal democratic theory as "radical theory." The term "radical," of course, typically denotes a perspective completely outside of liberal theory and in competition with it (typically on the Marxist left). Here, however, Holden means to denote a type of liberal democ-

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ratic theory inspired by a notion in Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*. I will re-dub this theory the "active" democratic theory. I will also re-dub its counterpart, which for obscure reasons he chooses to call "conventional." I shall call it the "consent" theory of democracy. The reasons for these name choices should be clear shortly.

15. The Kantian notion of "personhood" identifies the rights-bearing individual and is based on that individual's capacity for reason. Although a large and controversial issue, such theories usually hold children and the mentally incapacitated not to be "persons" in this sense (i.e., they are not full rights-bearers), and are thus justly treated in a paternalistic way (see Meldon 1980).
16. In fact, Christiano speaks of "aims," not "ends," to avoid implying that good Kantian citizens need reason only about policy outcomes. "Aims" include not only policy outcomes but those aspects of policy processes that are "chosen for their own sakes" (Christiano 1996, 170).
17. These understandings of political reasoning—specifically, understandings that move away from an individualistic and self-consciously rigorous (approximating deductive reasoning) models—may not, in fact, be so new. Recent revisionist interpretations of the thought of David Hume credit him with prescribing something similiar in his moral and political philosophy (Baier 1991; Norton 1982).
18. Downs (1957) has argued that the means-end rationality of the individual leads to this kind of distinction (between rationally informed elites and rationally ignorant masses). However, much of this argument relies upon the more fundamental assumption of a division of labor in society, which creates a differential in the political information costs for differently positioned individuals. As Christiano (1996, chap. 4) argues, one does not need to accept the narrow, economic understanding of individual rationality in order to be led to the conclusion that an elite-mass distinction will obtain (based on different information levels). The pervasiveness of the modern division of labor itself generates the problem.

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Richard D. Anderson, Jr.

THE PLACE OF THE MEDIA IN POPULAR DEMOCRACY

ABSTRACT: *Does media coverage of politics undermine democratic deliberation? By covering the "horse race" instead of the issues, the media encourage people to believe that politicians place self-interest above the public interest. The media also affect which issues people consider important, and negative advertisements discourage political participation. People learn from the media only because they know so little about politics. Were democracy deliberative, these media effects would undermine it. But democracy is not a deliberation but a contest that relies on the ability of the media to shape public opinion. The evidence for media effects is strong, but the media cannot be undermining a form of democracy that does not and cannot exist, and they do sustain the form that does.*

It is said that the American media debilitate democracy. The argument is simple. Democracy requires deliberation. Deliberation leads to wiser choices only if those who deliberate are well informed. Citizens obtain information about politics from the media. Were the news media to present serious discussion of political issues, they would foster deliberation, but in the United States the media trivialize issues, preferring gossip about the President's sex life to information about choices facing citizens. Because the media fail to inform

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citizens, deliberation is impoverished, democracy fails, and the results could be disastrous.

Sometimes the argument is stark. Donald Wood (1996, 206) writes:

> *representative democracy* . . . demands an *enlightened citizenry*; an educated citizenry must be kept informed by a *free press*; a free press is paid for by *commercial support*; commercial media must aim at a *mass audience*; programming for the mass audience means primarily *trivia and escapist content*; such "lowest-common-denominator" content results in an *ill-informed citizenry*; and an ill-informed society leads to *authoritarianism*.

Of course, arguments can afford to be stark when little effort is made to confirm them. Wood bases his claim on having "conducted an informal content analysis in one of [his] media courses" and on scattered surveys showing declines in literacy and in certain kinds of information among U.S. citizens (ibid., 209–210). But there is also more systematic evidence.

The Media's Effects on the Citizen

One form of evidence about media effects on deliberation is content analysis of television news, political advertising, and newspaper or magazine stories about politics. These analyses have consistently found that over time, the coverage of political campaigns by both broadcast and print media has paid decreasing attention to public policy and increasing attention to the contest between candidates. Randomly sampling campaign stories on the front page of *The New York Times* from every presidential election year between 1960 and 1992, Thomas Patterson found that stories about policy issues declined from more than 50 percent in 1960 to less than 20 percent in 1992, while stories about the horse race increased from over 40 percent to 80 percent of the coverage (Patterson 1993, 74). During the same period, stories mainly describing campaign events dropped from more than 90 percent to less than 20 percent, while stories providing the reporter's commentary on the campaign increased from less than 10 percent to 80 percent of the sample (ibid., 82). Patterson concludes that the change in media coverage is the "obvious reason" that citizens have stopped deliberating about political isssues during election campaigns (ibid., 93).

To show that citizens lack the autonomy presupposed in delibera-

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tive conceptions of democracy, Robert Entman has combined textual analysis with survey data. Entman draws on a classification of some 14,000 newspaper editorials to classify the newspapers as either liberal, moderate, or conservative. Comparing survey respondents' evaluations of politicians and causes with the newspapers they report that they regularly read, Entman (1989, 149) finds that citizens become 2 percent more positive toward liberal politicians and causes for every 1 percent increase in the liberalism of their preferred newspaper's editorials. Entman argues that the causation must run from newspaper content to reader attitudes, since reading liberal newspapers increases liberalism only among those respondents whose attitudes are conservative (ibid., 152). Entman concludes that Americans cannot fulfill the citizen's role of independently evaluating leaders and issues, because their opinions are powerfully biased by the editorial slant of the media they consume.

Rather than quantitative content analysis, Roderick P. Hart (1994, 18) relies on "listening, interpreting, imagining, and sensing" to identify the feelings that television evokes in its audience. Hart argues that television, despite its mass audience, is actually an interpersonal form of communication that triggers feelings of intimacy between the watcher and the personalities that appear on screen. Politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, who are effective television performers, exploit the intimacy of television to develop direct emotional ties with viewers. Far from motivating viewers to participate in politics, Hart claims, the false intimacy experienced through television displaces the true intimacy that can only develop through personal involvement. Deceived into believing that they know the candidate from the television screen, the viewers remain isolated in their living rooms. Not coming into contact with other citizens, they fail to establish the associational ties that stimulate political activity. Television viewers therefore become lethargic and indifferent to public affairs. In this manner, television breeds the alienation from politics that characterizes modern American democracy.

Experimental studies confirm that the media hide issues by highlighting contests, that citizens who consume mass media discard their own opinions in favor of those of editorialists, and that television watching encourages political apathy.

Political cynicism is the dependent variable in experimental work by Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. Jamieson (1992) had previously argued that television's visual intensity and broader

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audience turned negative campaigning into the cause of massive political alienation. In a book that has drawn widespread attention, she and Cappella have now claimed that the media are a principal source of the belief that politicians pursue self-interest rather than the public interest (Cappella and Jamieson 1997, 27–37). Cappella and Jamieson measured political cynicism by asking experimental subjects to answer a list of questions about the motives and conduct of candidates for office. The experiments show that when exposed to coverage of the horse race, people become more likely to choose answers that describe politicians as self-interested and their invocations of the public good as hypocritical. Exposure to coverage of issues produces no change in political cynicism.

Experimental investigation of whether media consumption distorts citizens' political judgment and alienates them from politics has been the specialty of Shanto Iyengar, who with a variety of colleagues has produced the most compelling evidence on these topics. Iyengar has looked sequentially at the separate cognitive phenomena triggered by "priming," "framing," and "tone." *Priming* increases the salience of an issue in people's evaluations of candidates. *Framing* changes their opinions about a particular issue (as opposed to a particular candidate—Cappella and Jamieson's concern) by describing it in different ways. *Tone* refers to whether a candidate's televised advertisements praise the candidate or denigrate an opponent.

Collaborating with Mark Peters and Donald Kinder, Iyengar both substantiated and extended the observation that media coverage of politics tells people less what to think than what to think about. This effect is known as "agenda setting." Demonstrating that as media coverage of an issue increased, people paid more attention to that issue, Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder (1982; Iyengar and Kinder 1987) showed that agenda setting by the media, in turn, subtly alters Americans' evaluations of presidential performance, which is known to exert a fundamental influence on their presidential voting choices. The experimenters exposed subjects over the course of six days to repeated television coverage of a given public issue, such as unemployment. The experimental subjects watched simulated television news broadcasts that included one story about the issue. The control group watched simulated news broadcasts without this story. At the end of the six days, respondents were asked to rank the most important issues and describe what should be done about them. They were also asked to rate separately the president's performance on each of a vari-

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ety of issues (including the test issue), the president's overall performance, his competence, and his integrity. Predictably, the agenda-setting effect emerged, as those who had watched the news broadcasts containing the story about the test issue rated that issue as more important than did those who had watched broadcasts without it. Less predictably, the correlation between people's evaluation of presidential performance on the test issue and their evaluation of presidential performance in general was significantly higher than the same correlation for the control group. This evidence of cognitive priming—of judgment that varies with the information placed by media at the center of attention—was reinforced by a second finding. When the president was evaluated by criteria more remote from the test issue, the effect of the test issue on the evaluation of the president dwindled. Evaluations of presidential performance on the test issue were more strongly correlated with evaluations of presidential *performance* in general than with evaluations of presidential *competence,* and the evaluations of presidential performance on the test issue were more strongly correlated with evaluations of presidential competence than with evaluations of presidential *integrity.*

Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder conclude that not only does media coverage tell the public what to think about; it also powerfully shapes the criteria by which people judge the incumbent president. Since evaluations of presidential performance affect how people vote, decisions by broadcast journalists about what to cover will alter electoral choices. The study does not directly address how people will deliberate about politics, but it seems reasonable to think that if exposure to media coverage of an issue alters the relative salience of various issues in people's evaluations of presidential performance, then exposure will also alter how much difference people think an issue makes to the national interest that presidential performance is supposed to advance. In that case, the outcome of democratic deliberation, too, will depend on what issues media personnel decide to cover.

Iyengar turned his attention to framing effects in his aptly titled *Is Anyone Responsible?* Here he investigated whether media framing of political problems changed people's attributions of responsibility for those problems. He exposed subjects to television coverage of six issues: poverty, terrorism, crime, unemployment, racial inequality, and the Reagan administration's sale of arms to Iran as a means of funding Nicaraguan rebels (the "Iran-Contra" issue). Each subject saw television coverage of one issue presented with either "episodic" or "the-

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matic" framing. Episodic framing presents one or more concrete instances of the issue. Thematic treatment frames the issue as a general condition with abstract rather than personal causes. Iyengar then asked the subjects whether they blame individuals for poverty, crime, terroristic acts, unemployment, subjection to racial prejudice, or involvement in governmental gun-running, or whether they hold public officials responsible for alleviating problems that society rather than individuals had caused.

Iyengar reports quite mixed results. Whether framing affected citizens' attributions of responsibility, and how this effect manifested itself, varied from one issue to the next. Episodic and thematic frames produced identical attributions of responsibility for unemployment, for which people held public officials responsible no matter what treatment they saw. Whether people blamed individuals or society for crime depended on the crime in question and the race of the perpetrator shown in the frame. People blamed drug abuse on individuals regardless of the frame, while the assignment of responsibility for other crimes depended on the race of the perpetrator shown in the broadcast. Crimes by whites were blamed on society regardless of framing, while crimes by blacks were blamed on the individual regardless of framing. By contrast to unemployment and crime, the other four issues—terrorism, poverty, racial inequality, and Iran-Contra—all showed strong framing effects. Because attributions of responsibility strongly influence inferences about the appropriateness of government action in these cases, Iyengar argues that the tendency of both television news and print journalism to discuss the individual case and the concrete detail in preference to abstract analysis of the general condition discourages citizens from demanding government action that, in the absence of media coverage, they would prefer.

Having studied how priming and framing alter public opinion, Iyengar then turned to the issue of political alienation. Like Cappella and Jamieson two years later, Iyengar began with the decline of voter turnout. The proportion of eligible adults casting ballots in U.S. presidential elections dropped from 62.8 percent in 1960 to barely 50 percent in 1996 (Finkel and Geer 1998, 582). Iyengar investigated whether television, by offering political candidates the technological ability to reach millions of voters with advertisements vividly denigrating each other's record and character, was alienating potential voters from the electoral process. Jamieson (1992, 50–51) had previously acknowledged that vicious personal and policy attacks had marked

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American campaigning from the earliest days of the Republic, but she had warned that "television has capacities that stump speakers, print barrages, and radio appeals lack."

Joining with a specialist in methodology, Stephen Ansolabehere, Iyengar subjected hypotheses about the effects of negative television campaigning on political alienation both to experimental test and to verification by analysis of actual turnout. The experiments proceeded during various California campaigns of the early 1990s, including the 1992 presidential contest. Ansolabehere and Iyengar showed each subject a television broadcast into which they inserted either a positive advertisement about a candidate, a negative advertisement about the candidate's principal opponent, or an advertisement for a commercial product. The positive and negative test advertisements were visually identical; they differed only in a voice-over that either touted the candidate identified as sponsoring the advertisement or attacked the candidate's opponent. Those subjects who had registered to vote were then asked whether they intended to vote in the election. Exposure to a single negative advertisement, buried in a half-hour television program, of which no conscious memory was available to a third of the subjects, nevertheless lowered the number intending to vote by 2.3 percent relative to the group that saw a product advertisement. Viewing a single positive advertisement raised the number intending to vote (relative to the control group) by an equal amount (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995, 104).

Ansolabehere and Iyengar then replicated their experimental finding by analyzing aggregate turnout. They used a content analysis of press coverage of all 34 Senate races in 1992 to assess the tone of the campaign as positive, mixed, or negative. Then they compared the tone against both turnout in the Senate races and "rolloff" (the difference between the vote in the presidential and the senatorial contests). Negative Senate campaigns depressed turnout by 4.5 percent relative to positive campaigns, almost the same difference found in the experimental study. Rolloff increased from 3.3 percent in positive Senate campaigns to 6 percent in negative campaigns (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995, 107–108).

These findings leave little doubt that Jamieson was correct to warn that increased reliance on television by campaigners has intensified feelings of political alienation among American citizens. At the same time, contrary to Jamieson's suspicion that television can both "invite strong, unthinking negative responses in low-involvement viewers"

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and "short-circuit the normal defenses that more educated, more highly involved viewers ordinarily marshal" (1992, 50), Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995, 111) found that the effects of negative advertising were concentrated among the viewers with low involvement. Intention to vote declined by 3 percent among partisan voters but by 11 percent among nonpartisans, who tend to be less involved than partisans. They also found that, relative to the effect of a positive advertisement, a single negative advertisement lowered confidence in the political process by 2.8 percent and confidence in people's own ability to participate by 5.2 percent (ibid., 104).

Iyengar's experiments show that even minimal exposure to negative media coverage of politics alienates citizens, particularly those most marginal to the process. With partisanship in decline, the finding that negative campaigning distances nonpartisans from politics looms particularly ominously if one is concerned about the universality of participation.

Another way to measure the effect of media consumption on deliberation is the technique that James Fishkin calls a "deliberative poll." Fishkin has conducted these polls in both the United States and Great Britain; here I deal with the British results. A polling firm surveyed a random sample of British subjects about their views on the problem of rising crime. Three hundred of the respondents (said to be typical of the larger random sample) were then invited to convene in the presence of experts for a discussion of the problem of crime. In order to encourage responsible deliberation, the participants were informed in advance that the deliberation would be televised. Fishkin then compared the participants' opinions after deliberation with their responses to the preliminary survey.

Fishkin reports that deliberation produced large changes in the opinions of the 300 participants relative to the attitudes expressed in the original survey. Support for imprisoning more criminals declined by one-third. Support for alternatives to imprisonment increased by almost one-third. Support for defendants' procedural rights grew by a porportion ranging from one-sixth to one-third, depending on the specific right in question. Fishkin (1996, 137–38) concludes that the deliberative poll offers hope for "using the two technologies, polling and television, that have, thus far, combined to give us a superficial form of mass democracy" to enable "the people to think about the power they are to exercise."

Fishkin's findings reveal a wide gap between the public good when

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it is evaluated after media consumption alone and when it is evaluated after consultation with experts and discussion among citizens. If media consumption tends to displace the search for information and discussion, then it does indeed undermine deliberation.

Media scholars have also shown that while citizens do learn about politics from both media coverage and political advertisements, learning occurs largely because people begin with an extraordinarily impoverished stock of political information.

Both broadcast news and print media are informative, albeit possibly in different ways. Surveys in the United States show that self-reported attentiveness to politics and reading the newspaper are the strongest predictors of knowledge about the two main parties' stands on political issues. Watching television, by contrast, predicts knowledge about candidates' personal traits (Chaffee and Frank 1996, 52–53) and candidates' issue positions (Weaver 1996, 40). Cappella and Jamieson (1997, 146–49), on the other hand, found that newspapers and television had parallel effects. Predictably, exposure to strategy coverage in both media informed people about the candidates' standing in the horse race. Exposure to issue coverage encouraged learning about the issues. Given Patterson's finding that newspapers now overwhelmingly provide strategy coverage, and Hart's conclusion that the shift to watching television has redirected citizens' attention toward intimacy with candidates and away from impersonal issues, people are probably learning "who-whom" rather than "what is to be done." When television does address the issues, as in campaign advertising, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995, 43–46) report that, regardless of tone, advertisements increased experimental subjects' knowledge of positions taken on the issues by candidates in the 1990 California gubernatorial race and in the two 1992 senatorial races, although advertisements did not affect people's ability to locate Clinton versus Bush on the issues.

Exposure to media coverage produces learning about both issues and personalities only because people know so little to begin with. Ansolabehere and Iyengar asked their respondents to place candidates accurately on two issues: the death penalty and the right to end a pregnancy. Even though both are "hot-button" issues in California politics as well as American politics generally, fewer than three out of ten members of the control group could correctly place the candidates on both issues. Exposure to two political advertisements raised this proportion to five in ten, on average. Such remarkably impover-

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ished knowledge even about politically salient issues recapitulates standard findings about U.S. citizens' grasp of political information (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

In sum, the media's impact on the American citizen appears to be baleful for democratic deliberation. Media coverage of elections encourages citizens to think about who is ahead, their strategies for getting ahead, and their personalities, not about issues. Arguably, the transition from print to television has encouraged people to focus on their feelings of intimacy with the candidate, not on reasoned considerations. When the media do address issues, they shift people's attention from issues they would otherwise consider important to the issues they see on the screen. Issues that capture media attention become more salient in citizens' evaluations of politicians while driving out other concerns. For some issues at least, the media habit of emphasizing the concrete and the particular at the expense of the abstract and general lowers citizens' expectations of elected officials and encourages them to shrug their shoulders at social problems, which they are induced to blame on the victims. Candidates who are behind face incentives to cut into their opponents' leads by going negative, driving away marginal voters by increasing their alienation from politics and lowering their political self-confidence. And while media coverage of politics is instructive, this is only because people start from an abysmal knowledge base.

The Media's Impact on Democracy

The media's impact on the citizen, demonstrated in repeated studies by communications scholars, is different from the media's impact on democracy. While the studies I have described could be challenged on various methodological grounds, the results are consistent across researchers and methods. Collectively, findings by media scholars are robust, even if individual studies are less so. But it is less clear that the evidence justifies the conclusion by many of these scholars (although not all, and particularly not Iyengar) that the contemporary media, and particularly television, place democracy in jeopardy by eroding citizens' capacity to deliberate.

Those scholars who blame the media for impairing deliberative democracy are mainly worried about the ability of the *demos* to control the state. Popular control of the state would seem to require at

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least two conditions. First, the people must be informed about the activities of the state and its personnel. Otherwise they cannot monitor whether the state is acting contrary to their wants. Second, the people require autonomous criteria for judging the conduct of the state. These criteria constitute the "wants" against which the state's adequacy is judged. Media scholarship leaves little doubt that both conditions are absent. Instead of telling people what the state is doing, the media preponderantly tell people how the candidates behave in their personal lives and what they are doing to get and keep office. Instead of enabling citizens to make autonomous judgments, the media alter the very criteria by which citizens evaluate the state. Finally, the media not only undermine the conditions needed if citizens are to control the state, but in the process they convince them that control over the state is unattainable. Citizens are made cynical about the willingness of politicians to pursue the public interest instead of their private goals, and they are discouraged from exercising what control they have by negative advertising and horse-race coverage that make politics seem too dirty for them to touch.

But the effects of the media on democratic deliberation are not unambiguous. Take negative advertising, which especially diminishes participation among those least attentive to politics. While deliberative democrats usually want to combine deliberation with inclusion (Dryzek 1994, 1996), if the inattentive are ill-informed, their participation in politics may impair rather than enhance the quality of deliberation. By dissuading ill-informed people from participating, negative advertising may make politics *more* deliberative. On the other hand, deliberation and becoming informed are themselves forms of political participation. If negative advertising discourages people from the minimal form of participation represented by voting, it may make them even more resistant to the more burdensome tasks of deliberation and of the information acquisition that enables people to deliberate effectively.

Like negative advertising by politicians, the media's use of the media may be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, content analyses showing issue coverage giving way to coverage of the horse race and to a focus on personality may be read as implying both that people will receive less information about issues and that they will devote less energy to discussion of issues, hampering deliberation. On the other hand, since the issues can be expected to change over the course of a candidate's occupancy of office, maybe the candidate's

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character and his or her ability to win political battles are more appropriate topics for deliberation than the transient issues of the day. Similarly, when experiments find that news coverage makes people less likely to demand government action because they become more likely to blame individuals for their troubles, we might conclude either that the media are short-circuiting public-policy deliberation in favor of blaming the victim, or that the media are contributing to deliberation that reaches conservative conclusions.

Finally, the citizens' own use of the media has ambiguous consequences for deliberation. If democracy is identified with deliberation, it may be troubling that citizens seem to be shifting from print media capable of discussing issues in depth to electronic media whose coverage is invariably briefer and thus more superficial. The rising consumption of one-sided coverage, exemplified by talk radio, raises alarms as well. At the same time, evidence that newspapers cover the horse race while both television news and television advertising inform viewers about candidates' character may be read as indicating that when they shift from newspapers to television, citizens are seeking the information they need to deliberate about candidates.

It may be that critical scholarship concerning the media's role in politics has misplaced its emphasis. The critics of the media reside in a democracy and study democratic politics. Dissatisfaction with American democracy may be natural. In Europe this dissatisfaction is felt even more strongly, as it is in new democracies from Russia to Chile. But if media scholars studied dictatorships or monarchies, or lived in places where democracy does not prevail, as for example in the American South before the civil rights movement succeeded, they might see the impact of the media differently. Perhaps the problem is less the inability of citizens to control the state than the opportunity for citizens to *escape* control *by* the state. Media that are "out of order," in Patterson's phrase, may even help citizens free themselves from the state. Cynicism, diversion from policies to personalities and "horse races," the displacement by media priorities of the citizens' own priorities if left to themselves, and even negative advertising may all be costs associated with the media's positive contribution to freeing citizens from the state. Media distortion of public opinion may arise because of the very solution the media offer to the problem of how democracy's guarantees of liberty can ever be effective.

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Deliberation vs. Democracy

The classical, deliberative ideal of democracy may conflict with inclusiveness if extended discussion is so demanding of time and other resources that it effectively excludes people who would participate if they needed only to vote. What matters, in my view, is not whether highly educated political scientists consider the level of public discussion to be beneath a level identified as sufficiently "deliberative." Instead what matters is whether participation is open to all citizens. If the media emphasize contests rather than issues, attract attention to politics by dramatizing it, make learning about politics easier by simplifying and condensing it, help citizens pick out some issues as important from the welter of possibly important ones, and generate feelings of intimacy with politicians by attending to their personalities, the media may make politics more interesting and accessible, helping to include people who might otherwise think it remote from their personal concerns. Whether media effects undermine democracy depends on whether one accepts a deliberative or a competitive understanding of democracy. If inclusion rather than deliberation produces the desirable consequences of democracy, maybe the media effects that corrode deliberation should be praised, not damned.

Suspicion of the media appears to rely on a theory of democracy that Joseph Schumpeter ([1942] 1976) subjected to devastating criticism more than a half-century ago. What he called the "Classical Doctrine of Democracy" (Schumpeter capitalized whenever debunking) held that there exists a "Common Good . . . which every normal person can be made to see by means of rational argument." Accordingly, the classical doctrine considers democracy imperilled whenever anything, such as the media, impairs rational discourse. But as Schumpeter pointed out, people simply are not responsible citizens. "The core of the trouble" is

> the ordinary citizen's ignorance and lack of judgment in matters of domestic and foreign policy which are if anything more shocking in the case of educated people and of people who are successfully active in non-political walks of life than it is with uneducated people in humble stations. Information is plentiful and readily available. But this does not seem to make any difference. (Schumpeter 1976, 261.)

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Because real democratic citizens do not perform as the classical theory requires, Schumpeter reconceived democracy as the method of choosing national leaders by requiring them to compete for votes. This conception of democracy falls far short of the deliberative ideal. Citizenship becomes a matter of identity, not of responsibility. The citizen is defined by a role, not by a capacity. Citizens serve their purpose if they choose those who deliberate; whether the citizens themselves bother to deliberate does not matter to Schumpeter. In his conception, the benefits of democracy to its citizens do not depend on the quality of their deliberations, or even on their deliberating at all. Consider what he says (1976, 271–72) about "the relation that subsists between democracy and individual freedom": "If, on principle at least, everyone is free to compete for political leadership by presenting himself to the electorate, this will in most cases though not in all mean a considerable amount of freedom of discussion *for all*. In particular it will normally mean a considerable amount of freedom of the press."

Schumpeter's rejection of the deliberative conception of democracy contrasts explicitly with the understanding of democracy prevalent in the discussion of media effects on citizenship. Cappela and Jamieson even write the "Public Good" into the subtitle of their book on political cynicism. Wood refers in the subtitle of his volume to the "Failure of Reason and Responsibility." Fishkin quotes with approval another scholar's statement: "A vigorous democracy cannot settle for a passive citizenry that merely chooses leaders and then forgets entirely about politics. . . . Some kind of effective public deliberation is required that involves the citizenry as a whole" (Fishkin 1997, 973; quoting Page 1996, 4; Fishkin's emphasis deleted). Iyengar's *Is Anyone Responsible?*, on the other hand, can be read as a Schumpeterian challenge to the very possibility of deliberative citizenship.

Despite the aversion of Cappella and Jamieson or Wood or Fishkin, Schumpeterian democracy, in which leaders compete to lure reluctant citizens to the polls, has certain merits that are all too easily overlooked. As Barbara Geddes (1994) has perceived, while such a democracy often tolerates outrageous abuses, from time to time the contest among the elites may become too close for comfort—for their comfort, that is. Since they particularly want people to turn out when the race is close, political elites will, in these circumstances, try especially hard to win popular favor. Thus, they offer reforms: new rights, more effective governance. Crucially, they may try to win a

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tight race by favoring the extension of the right to participate to people previously excluded. Once reforms have been granted, of course, elites can try to take them back, but because human beings are even more responsive to the threat of loss than to the prospect of gain, usually, once having surrendered some of its arbitrary power over citizens, the state encounters great difficulty in recovering its former discretion.

Democracy guarantees liberties if enough citizens respond to the contestants' appeals for support by voting. Voting itself, however, is as paradoxical as becoming informed about politics. It is clear to Fishkin that citizens are "rationally ignorant," and it is this rational ignorance that he seeks to correct. This was clear to Schumpeter (1976, 261), too: "The private citizen musing over national affairs . . . is a member of an unworkable committee, the committee of the whole nation, and this is why he expends less effort on mastering a political problem than he does on a game of bridge," in which "every mistake we make will not only immediately tell but also be immediately allocated to us." But what seems, remarkably, to have escaped both Schumpeter and Fishkin is this: the same factors that make it rational for citizens to be uninformed about politics also make it rational for nearly all citizens to abstain from voting under nearly all imaginable circumstances (Lohmann 1995, 143–46). If democracy extends liberties because politicians want votes, and if democratic liberties are preserved when enough citizens vote against politicians who try to take liberties back, then democratic guarantees cannot be effective if citizens decide whether to vote as rational, informed individuals, because such citizens would, effectively, never vote, inasmuch as voting cannot possibly make a difference sufficient to justify the cost of voting. Since democracy guarantees liberties only if enough citizens vote, and citizens vote in large numbers only if they fail to act as the rational, informed individuals about whose absence so many scholars express such concern, the media's various encroachments on the rationality or informedness of judgment may actually contribute to the effectiveness of democracy in achieving what it does (and if it safeguards human liberty, that accomplishment is not small).

Consider three reasons for wondering whether media coverage of politics does indeed foster democracy. First, there is a suspicious coincidence in U.S. politics between the rise of horse-race coverage and the spread of civil liberties. A peculiarity of the dates with which Patterson begins and ends his content analysis, 1960 and 1992, is (at least

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for a Louisianan by upbringing) that over the same period that the horse race has displaced policy discourse in newspaper coverage of presidential elections, presidential politics in the United States has freed people who, if not previously living under despotism, nevertheless were assuredly denied elementary rights, not just to vote, but to have their lives protected by the state and to pursue happiness untrammeled by a refusal to deal with them on the part of those among whom they lived. There is at least an elective affinity between the transformation of media coverage and the still-incomplete freeing of African-Americans in the South. When politics is conceived as deliberation over policy, the best educated might be thought to have the most to offer. Indeed, in the South, the standard racist argument against equal rights concerned the supposed incompetence of people who, having been denied equal access to education, continued to be denied equal access in order to maintain them in a condition that ostensibly justified (in the circular reasoning characteristic of racism) the further violation of their rights. There is a reason why it was a schoolhouse door that George Wallace chose to block. When, on the other hand, politics is simply a horse race, won by the candidate with the highest vote count, any vote counts, and no reason can be given to discount anyone's vote. Suppose that people assess their collective identity by associating themselves with positively valued symbols and dissociating themselves from negatively valued ones (Turner et al. 1987, 44–58, 76). Then, when politics moves from being positively valued (concerned with issues) to being negatively valued (just a horse race), people who have used exclusive political rights as a positive marker of racial distinctiveness will drop voting from the definition of their racial identity and replace it with some other, more positive symbol. The media's devaluing of politics breaks the connection between racial supremacy and exclusive political rights.

Second, horse-race coverage encourages realism. Patterson laments that citizens have stopped talking about issues and turned to contests, but according to Schumpeter's theory of democracy it is contests, not issues, that people should discuss. Arguably, then, media coverage is making people practical, not cynical. Cappella and Jamieson (1997, 19–25) offer as evidence of popular cynicism the disjunction between studies showing that politicians keep their campaign promises and popular belief that these promises go unfulfilled. Why the fact that politicians keep their promises should be thought inconsistent with the popular image of politicians as self-interested has long escaped

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me. If a politician is selling his or her reputation, is it not self-interested to take actions designed to preserve that reputation by making good on campaign promises?

People may fail to recognize politicians' incentive to keep campaign promises, but this failure is attributable neither to cynicism nor to realism. It is a failure of cognitive consistency, committed by experts and lay people alike. Disbelief in politicians' faithfulness to their campaign promises probably originates in an overgeneralization from spectacular examples like President George Bush's failure to fulfill his famous declaration: "Read my lips, no new taxes." Most citizens surprised by President Bush's failure had themselves failed to connect two things they knew. In 1990, 68 percent of Americans knew that President Bush had not kept his promise. In 1989, 89 percent could define a presidential veto (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 70, 74). Citizens who could define a veto necessarily knew that Congress and the President must make laws together, and presumably they knew in 1990 that a presidential veto was limited to rejecting the whole of any bill passed by Congress, not solely those provisions affecting taxes. The number who could not define a presidential veto was, at most, less than one-sixth of the number who knew President Bush had failed to keep his promise. Others who were surprised by the broken promise had simply failed to evaluate candidate Bush's pledge against their own knowledge of the limits on presidential powers. Bush had made a promise he couldn't keep, and anyone who expected him to keep his literal word (as opposed to those who expected him to oppose new taxes) cannot have thought the question through.

If people merely believe that politicians are able to do *less* than they promise, then they are being realistic, not cynical. (Jamieson and Cappella find that politicians tend to keep campaign promises, not that they always do). Again, if people believe that politicians are self-interested office-seekers, then by Schumpeter's theory, they are being realistic. And if media coverage encourages people to be realistic about politics, then it is informing them, not warping their judgment.

Third, horse-race coverage may actually foster voting. It is true that, as horse-race coverage displaced issue coverage, turnout in presidential elections declined substantially. But one must always consider omitted variables. One standard study, published in 1982, attributed 70 percent of the decline in turnout between 1960 and 1980 to the combination of declining trust in government (whether cynicism or realism) and diminishing partisanship (Abramson and Aldrich 1982,

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519). In 1976, about one-sixth fewer people considered themselves partisans of either major party than in 1964, and the intensity of partisanship had decreased even faster, with one-third fewer people considering themselves strong partisans (Norpoth and Rusk 1982, 522).

Declining partisanship and growing realism combine to make politicians depend more on the media. When parties have partisans, then they have both campaign workers to make contact and, far more important, voters whose loyalty makes them responsive to contact by such workers. As parties lose their partisans and partisanship becomes less intense, the effectiveness of parties in campaigning for their candidates diminishes. Becoming realistic, citizens who know that their participation cannot influence the contest become increasingly apathetic and resist learning about politics. If politicians are to win the electoral contest by motivating uninformed, apathetic citizens to vote, they need a substitute for the weakened party organization. Television, with its ability (firmly demonstrated by Iyengar) to equip citizens with both criteria and information for evaluating candidacies, offers politicians the needed instrument. Of course, even as television makes available the capability for positive advertising that can take the place of parties in stimulating turnout, it also provides the opportunity for negative advertising, which removes some citizens from the electorate. Either way, because the contest takes place through the media rather than through the parties, the media become more conscious of the contest as such. Greater media awareness of the contest makes the horse race more prominent in coverage of politics. But this cost is integral to the gain.

And citizens do gain from media coverage of politics. If politicians' desperation for votes preserves and expands liberty, as Schumpeter and Geddes tell us, it is media coverage that enables the politicians to quench their thirst. Perhaps the strongest argument for this conclusion is the care taken by antidemocratic regimes to preclude the media from covering politics. This is true even where the media are commercial. Singapore's Minister of Information and Arts, George Yeo, warns the media: "Remember your place in society before you engage in political debate. . . . You must make distinctions—what is high, what is low, what is above, what is below—and then within this we can have a discussion" (quoted in Parnassizadeh 1997, 12). If modern media coverage subverts democracy, one may ask why despots do not promptly institute freedom of the press. Of course it may be that the same media coverage that subverts democracy is even more sub-

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versive of tyranny. But if those are the only choices, mass media that know not their place are devoutly to be welcomed.

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Robert Y. Shapiro

PUBLIC OPINION, ELITES, AND DEMOCRACY

ABSTRACT: *Building on Philip Converse's understanding of public opinion, John Zaller sees the evidence for the public's "nonattitudes" as reflecting individuals' ambivalence concerning political issues. Because neither individuals nor the public collectively have what Zaller would call real attitudes, he concludes that the effectiveness of democracy rests on competition among intellectual and political elites. In truth, however, the public has many real attitudes that depend heavily on elite leadership, in ways that Converse did not initially emphasize but that are consistent with both his observations and Zaller's model of mass opinion. The quality of the public's attitudes are, however, a point of serious contention.*

Not long ago in *Critical Review*, Eric R.A.N. Smith (1996) described how various lines of recent research can be combined to offer a new perspective on the public ignorance that Philip Converse had under-

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scored in his seminal article, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (1964). Smith concluded that the more recent work shows "that although the opinions of individuals may not be rational or well informed, the opinions of the mass public taken as a whole are, if not rational, at least comprehensible. Whether this is enough to allay the worries raised by Converse, however, is, Smith concluded, "a topic for further investigation" (Smith 1996, 104).

Converse (1996) himself has reached sanguine conclusions about the implications of this new work for the competence of public opinion, even though his "The Nature of Belief Systems"—along with *The People's Choice*, by Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet (1948); *Voting*, by Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee (1954); and *The American Voter*, by Angus Campbell, Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald E. Stokes (1960)—seemed to show that public input into the political process could hardly be trusted, because the people are grossly uninformed about politics and about potentially useful issue-oriented and ideological ways of looking at the political world. The public appeared, at best, to rely on unsophisticated substitutes such as party identification and social-group and interpersonal influences. People's unstable and incoherent responses to questions in opinion surveys reflected "nonattitudes," not real attitudes toward issues and politics. While Converse (1964, 1970, and 1996) noticed variations in attention and sophistication among different segments of the public, as well as variations in the salience and importance accorded different issues by members of the public (cf. Converse and Markus 1979 and Converse 1970), the themes of "nonattitudes" and mass ignorance have stuck firmly in academic debate about the nature of public opinion, offering support for the "elitist theory of democracy" (see Walker 1966 versus Dahl 1966).

Smith's *Critical Review* essay emphasized that while recent work has covered much ground and offered a wealth of data on changes in public opinion, it does not provide a general theory of opinion *change*. While Smith does not state explicitly where such a theory might be found, one obvious source would be in the social psychology of individuals—that is, in theories about individuals' interpretations of and persuasion by new messages (information) and their sources. This approach has isolated influential variables in the laboratory, but finding such systematic effects in the real world, without the ability to measure and control for exposure to information and confounding effects, has been difficult (see Page and Shapiro 1992, ch. 8;

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Shapiro et al. 1991; Sears et al. 1988, ch. 7; Converse 1970, 168–69 [citing Hovland 1959] and 176–86).

John Zaller's *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) goes a long way toward filling this gap. The paperback edition accurately bills itself as "the most significant contribution to the scientific study of public opinion in almost three decades," a "model of what social science can be at its finest" that "reshapes the field in ways that will reverberate throughout the study of public opinion, elections, and the relationship between elites and the mass public for decades."

Converse calls Zaller's contribution "a giant step in the development of a systematic understanding of the dynamics of public opinion," and Zaller, in turn, explicitly acknowledges his intellectual debt to Converse (as well as to social psychologist William McGuire, whose model of attitude change he builds upon in the second half of the book). Zaller writes:

> What I take to be Converse's most important insight—that differences among citizens in their levels of conceptualization and awareness are as consequential as differences in values and interests—is reflected in every important argument I make. This book, in fact, might be considered essentially a synthesis and extension of two of Converse's classic papers, "The nature of belief systems in mass publics" and "Information flow and the stability of partisan attitudes." (xi)

Although neither Zaller's book nor Converse's seminal essay are mainly directed toward assessing democratic competence and control (indeed, these questions are relatively tangential to Zaller's main goal: the development of a highly analytical model of opinion and opinion change), Zaller's model of public opinion is sufficiently bleak (as was Converse's) to warrant a response from those who have defended the competence of public opinion in the long-running post-Converse debate over the implications of the findings of public opinion research for democracy (see especially Key 1961, 1966). The main questions in this debate are: To what extent is the mass public sufficiently capable of contributing constructively to political debate? And, by implication, to what extent should the public be permitted to influence what governments do, rather than leaving governance to political leaders and other elites?

The answers to these questions depend not only on evidence indi-

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cating the capabilities of elite versus mass opinion, but also on important subtleties in how the evidence is interpreted. The most straightforward view of the evidence seems to drive us to conclude that elites are, on average, more competent than masses: there are elites with stronger policy-related expertise than ordinary people; elites sometimes consist of specialists whose work almost automatically confers expertise on them. But it does not follow that, at all (or most) important times or on all (or most) important issues, elites alone should influence political debate and government policies. There might be varying degrees of relative competence between mass and elite opinion. At one end of the spectrum, it is conceivable that elites are always and everywhere the only ones competent enough to influence the policymaking process; at the other end, the mass public may always be sufficiently competent to be heeded directly by government. Different degrees of mass versus elite competence fall in between.

Clearly, neither Zaller nor the Converse of "The Nature of Belief Systems" paints a picture of an omnicompetent public. Other authors, such as V. O. Key (1961 and 1966); Paul M. Sniderman, Richard A. Brody, and Philip E. Tetlock (1991); Samuel Popkin (1991); James A. Stimson (1991); Benjamin Page and myself (1992); and, most recently, Arthur Lupia and Mathew McCubbins (1998) have taken positions closer to the optimistic pole of the debate by describing the ability of "the reasoning voter" to use information shortcuts and thereby contribute to the collective or aggregate wisdom of "the rational public." Such authors do not deny that the public, individually or collectively, could be much better informed about, attentive to, and involved in politics, nor that the quality of its policy preferences and other opinions could be improved upon (cf. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Putnam 1995; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996; Bartels 1996; Austin-Smith and Banks 1996). Nor do we deny that improvements in public opinion are highly dependent on what elites say and do. Therefore, it is appropriate to ask whether Zaller's work is genuinely at odds with these optimistic interpretations of the public's competence.

Zaller's Deceptive Optimism

While Zaller clearly advances a Conversean understanding of public opinion, it is Converse who, in the end, gives somewhat more credit

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to the public than Zaller. This is not, admittedly, the initial impression one gains. Converse says that individuals have inconsistent and very loosely connected opinions, while Zaller eschews this "nonattitudes" thesis in favor of describing members of the mass public as highly "ambivalent." To say that people are ambivalent speaks better of them than to say that when it comes to the issues of the day, they do not have any attitudes at all.

But Zaller also writes that "individuals do not possess 'true attitudes,' in the usual sense of the term, on most political issues, but a series of considerations that are typically rather poorly integrated. . . . People do not typically have 'just one attitude' on issues" (308). To understand this fully we need to better define the meanings of the terms *attitude* and *true attitude* or *real attitude*, and we need to note that Zaller qualifies his pessimism by applying it not to all but to "*most* political issues" (emphasis added).

Zaller concludes that on most issues, most individuals do not have true attitudes. If the public is the sum or aggregation of such individuals, there can hardly be a competent public opinion (if competence means having real attitudes). In this sense Zaller and Converse seem very close to each other, and to an elitist critique of public opinion. Converse and Zaller are also alike in studying public opinion by asking people questions in sample surveys. "The Nature of Belief Systems" prompted a debate about whether standard survey research could measure attitudes or opinions adequately (cf. Lane 1962 and 1973; Hochschild 1981; Achen 1975; Erikson 1979), and Zaller builds directly on the arguments and evidence from this debate.

Zaller systematically develops numerous propositions to which this essay can hardly do justice. But the centerpiece of the book is the set of axioms that constitute Zaller's "Receive-Accept-Sample" (RAS) model, and these are worth setting out in full:

> A1. *Reception Axiom.* The greater a person's level of cognitive engagement with an issue, the more likely he or she is to be exposed to and comprehend—in a word, to receive—political messages concerning that issue.
>
> A2. *Resistance Axiom.* People tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, but they do so only to the extent they possess the contextual information necessary

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to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions.

> A3. *Accessibility Axiom.* The more recently a consideration has been called to mind, or thought about, the less time it takes to retrieve that consideration or related considerations from memory and bring them to the top of the head for use.
>
> A4. *Response Axiom.* Individuals answer survey questions by averaging across the considerations that are immediately salient or accessible to them. (58)

The third and fourth axioms supersede Converse's nonattitudes thesis. One of the catalysts for this thesis was a set of puzzling, if not startling, survey results. A major finding from panel surveys—that is, from interviews of the same individuals at two or more points in time (whether the time interval was a few months or a few years, as later researchers found)—was that even in the absence of appreciable change in the *aggregate* distribution of opinion toward an issue or attitude object, *individual* survey respondents gave widely varying responses to the same question from one interview to the next. The overall aggregate stability of opinion occurred because individuals' changing responses tended to cancel each other out when they were added up. Converse argued that the pattern of responses in particular cases (when abstract and ideological questions were asked) was so random as to be akin to tossing coins or rolling dice (he later called this his "black-and-white" model). Caught off-guard when asked by interviewers about issues to which they had given little thought, their answers lacked underlying attitudes.

But Zaller sees a lot more going on than Converse did. "Nonattitudes" evokes the image of individuals with nothing in their heads; Zaller thinks that people have all too many thoughts in their heads. These thoughts, which he calls "considerations," can be either different beliefs that can be very loosely called separate attitudes, or they can be tied together in what social psychologists call "schemas" or "stereotypes." In either case, however, an individual's considerations do not constitute a *single* "true," "stable" or "crystallized" attitude about a given issue or object, because she will have *many* of them.

For example, when a survey respondent is asked about "welfare reform," many conflicting considerations can come to mind: not only

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distraught people in real need, but undeserving people who would rather collect welfare checks than look for a job. When individuals who go back and forth like this are, essentially, forced to give an answer to a survey question, it is not surprising that they give different answers at different times, depending upon what considerations happen to be foremost in their minds. What is foremost in their minds depends, according to Zaller, on whatever new information they have received from the mass media or from everyday interactions and experiences, information that alters the mix and prominence of the considerations in their minds just prior to the survey interview. This is the essence of the Zaller's third and fourth axioms.

Zaller developed this conceptualization of survey responses in a much earlier paper (and in his collaborative work with Stanley Feldman) as a "simple theory of the survey response" (Zaller 1984; Zaller and Feldman 1992). Even before this model of the survey response was published, it came to be widely regarded and cited as a very useful way to think about survey responses and public opinion (see Bartels 1988, 65–88; Page and Shapiro 1992, ch. 1).

Figure 1, based on Zaller's model (Page and Shapiro 1992, 20–21; Bartels 1988, 69), depicts the hypothetical distribution of the considerations in the mind of a single individual. The individual "samples" from this distribution of considerations when she responds to a survey question (or when she votes). Figure 1 should also represent the distribution of the respondent's answers to the same question when it is repeated on different occasions.

In technical terms, the responses shown in the particular example in Figure 1 are based on a multicategory continuous measurement, such as answers to a question asking how much the United States should spend on national defense. More typically, a survey question might have only two substantive responses (e.g., "Do you favor or oppose" some policy proposal) or a few ordered categories (e.g., "favor strongly," "favor somewhat," "neutral," "oppose somewhat," "oppose strongly"). But Zaller's analysis remains relevant as long as the same respondent is asked the identical question in many surveys. The resulting pattern displays both substantial instability (as shown by the dispersion of the distribution) and a clear central tendency—an average or mean.

This model of the survey response explains a host of phenomena well known in public-opinion research. In addition to response instability in panel surveys, it explains the significant effects produced by

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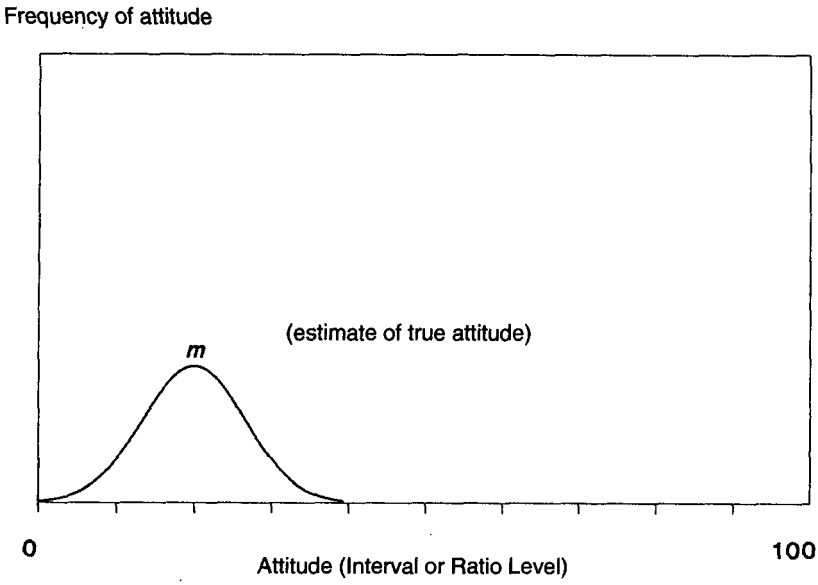
Figure 1. Distribution of a Hypothetical Individual's Attitudes about a Particular Issue



question wording and ordering. A classic case is the finding that the public supports spending on "assistance to the poor" much more than it does spending on welfare. The different wording of the question "frames" the issue differently due to the connotation of the word *welfare*. According to Zaller and Feldman (1992), questions about "welfare" should evoke a different sampling of considerations (e.g., fraud, abuse, "welfare queens," mismanagement) than questions about "assistance for the poor" (e.g., struggling families, hungry children, people living in squalor, lack of available jobs for breadwinners), leading respondents to give different answers. Similarly, a respondent's answer to a question about whether taxes are too high can be affected by placing this question after others concerning whether we should continue high levels of spending on Social Security or Medicare, which the public strongly supports. Zaller (32) cites an experiment showing that during the Cold War, survey respondents expressed more support for allowing Communist reporters into the United States when the respondents were first asked whether American reporters should be allowed into Russia (which most respondents favored). This question

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ordering reframed the question in a way that evoked the consideration of norms of reciprocity or fair play and thereby changed people's responses.

Since, for Zaller, response instability represents ambivalence, not nonattitudes, things may seem better than Converse thought. While a great deal of ambivalence about all issues might suggest that people really don't know what they think (nonattitudes), differential ambivalence is different. But Zaller resists offering this optimistic interpretation by contrasting his position with that of such analysts as Christopher Achen (1975; see also Erikson 1979 and Bishop et al. 1995), who argue that individuals and the public do have real attitudes but that their instability is attributable to "measurement error" caused by the language used in survey questions. As Zaller puts it:

> If Converse's nonattitudes thesis (based on huge response instability in the University of Michigan's 1956–58–60 NES Panel Study) is correct, Achen wrote, "Democratic theory loses its starting point" (1975, 1227). In contrast, the implication of Achen's empirical investigation was more optimistic: Most members of the public have "true attitudes" that are almost perfectly stable. The disturbingly high levels of response change noted by Converse are due only to the vague questions of survey researchers rather than the vague minds of citizen respondents. (94)

Zaller concedes that

> nothing in the RAS model is strictly inconsistent with this view. One reason that, as the RAS model claims, individuals so often bring different considerations to the evaluation of the same question may be, exactly as Achen contends, that most questions are open to multiple intepretations. In other words, both the measurement error and the RAS models agree that response instability occurs because ordinary language is rarely precise enough to force individuals to think about an issue in the same way every time they confront it. (74)

> There is, however, a fundamental difference between the two models. In the measurement error tradition, response error is simply so much noise. It has no substance and signifies nothing of interest about the nature of mass opinion. Insofar as we learn anything of theoretical signficance from it, we learn about the vagueness of natural language rather than the nature of public opinion. In the RAS model, by contrast, response variation is rooted in an important substantive phenom-

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> enon, namely the common existence of ambivalence in people's reactions to issues. This ambivalence has numerous implications. . . . (75)

Zaller's view, therefore,

> falls somewhere between the Converse and Achen positions. It agrees with Converse that there is a great deal of uncertainty, tentativeness, and incomprehension in the typical mass survey response. The problem, it further contends, is much deeper than vague questions. And yet, with Achen, it rejects the premise of Converse's black-and-white nonattitudes model, which is that most response fluctuation is due to essentially random guessing by people who have no meaningful opinions. (95)

Thus, Zaller holds that even in giving inconsistent answers, people may "be expressing real feelings, in the sense that they are responding to the issue as they see it at the moment of response. Although perceptions of the issue may change over time, the responses they generate are not, for that reason, lacking in authenticity" (ibid.).

At this point Zaller has rebutted Achen's measurement-error explanation of response instability, and it seems that he does so by conceding some measure of public competence. However, this concession is illusory because of Zaller's doubts about the existence of something close to real attitudes at both the individual and aggregate levels. The *central tendency* of an individual's reported attitudes is still highly problematic.

On the one hand, the central tendency of an individual's considerations or survey responses is a better summary measure of the individual's overall orientation toward an issue than a single survey response. The central tendency is the closest we will find, in Zaller's framework, to a true attitude. If we consider "attitudes" synonymous with "considerations," then the central tendency could also be called a "preference" (see Bartels 1998, drawing on Kahenman and Ritov 1998). While we can quibble about what label to put on it, the nature and behavior of this central tendency is crucial for assessing the public's political competence.

While individuals' attitudes may vary at different times as they sample different considerations, the central tendency of aggregate opinion is very often quite stable, since individuals' fluctuating attitudes may cancel each other out in the aggregation process, as Figure 2 shows (see Page and Shapiro 1992, Stimson 1991, and Mayer 1992).

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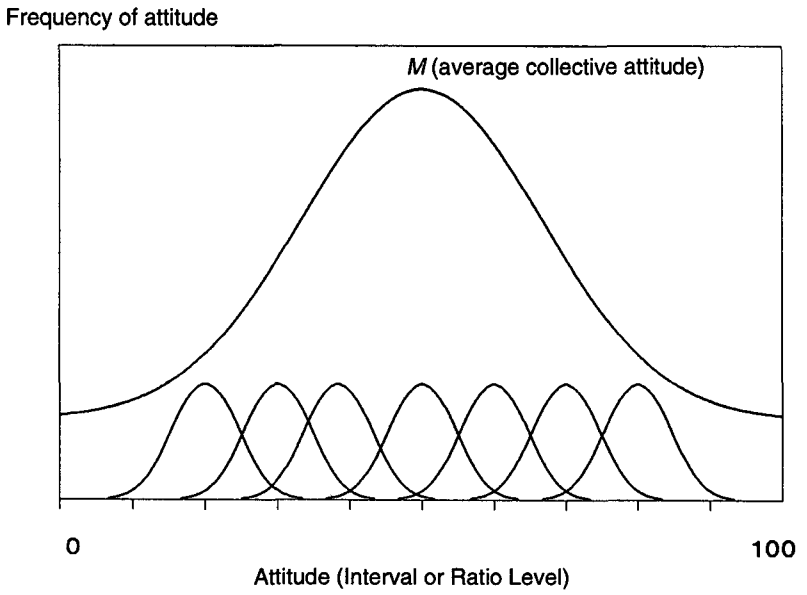
Figure 2. Hypothetical Distribution of Collective Public Attitude about a Particular Issue



Zaller, however, denies that the aggregation process is a panacea. So does Converse (1986, 377–83 and personal communication) who, while recognizing the importance of the voting studies that showed impressively rational aggregate responses, notes that in theory, extraordinarily little "signal" relative to individual-level "noise" could produce these results.

Zaller writes that while "purely random fluctuation between opposing positions, each of which is sincerely held, would have significance, in that it would accurately indicate the balance of the person's true feelings . . . the thrust of my argument has been to deny the existence of any such true position, either at the level of the individual or at the level of the public as a whole" (94). For

> what gets measured as public opinion is always dependent on the way questions have been framed and ordered. If different frames or different question orders produce different results, it is not because one or the other has distorted the public's true feelings; it is, rather, because

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> the public, having no fixed true opinion, implicitly relies on the particular question it has been asked [so as] to determine what exactly the issue is and what considerations are relevant to settling it. (95)

Moreover, even if pollsters could construct and order questions in ways that did not manufacture the public opinion they are trying to measure, this would merely "pass the buck for framing the expression of public opinion back to the larger political community—to the politicians, issue activists, interest group leaders, journalists and media consultants, many of whom clearly do relish the opportunity to actively shape the expression of public opinion" (ibid.). For these elites are themselves the source of the considerations that survey respondents and voters sample when they report their opinions and vote.

"Political leaders," Zaller writes, "are seldom the passive instruments of majority opinion. Nor, as it seems to me, do they often attempt openly to challenge public opinion. But they do regularly attempt to play on the contradictory ideas that are always present in people's minds, elevating the salience of some and harnessing them to new initiatives while downplaying or ignoring other ideas—all of which is just another way of talking about issue framing" (96).

Optimism Revived and Questioned

While this sounds like a cynical view of political leaders and other elites that gives them an all-powerful capacity to manipulate public opinion, in the end Zaller emphasizes that such elites are central to making democracy work.

The process by which elites affect what considerations are brought to bear in the public's reported attitudes and its votes are related by Axioms 1–3 of the RAS model. Political messages from elites are the sources of arguments on the different sides of what come to be known as "issues," and the salience of these messages for the public depends on how recently they were received.

People's resistance to arguments found in elite messages depends in part, according to Zaller, upon whether elites are unified or divided. If the only messages people receive are the monolithic results of a "mainstream" elite consensus, the result will be a united public opinion (as long as the public perceives these messages to be consistent with its underlying "predispositions," or values—about which, more

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below). Thus, for example, the American public rallied to support President Bush in the Gulf War in 1990 (see Mueller 1994 and Brody 1991); and President Nixon, with the support of an apparently unified Washington community, generated overnight public support for wage and price controls in 1971 (97).

In contrast, visible disagreements (a "polarizing" dissensus) among elites prompt people to screen out those arguments that contradict their own predispositions; so that, for example, Republicans—to the extent that they are attuned enough to the political debate to understand which side of an issue is the "Republican" side—will be able to ignore the arguments offered by Democratic elites. Thus, when a Republican president enters office, support for U.S. involvement in foreign affairs increases a bit among Republican party identifiers and declines comparably among Democrats (Page and Shapiro 1992, 309–11). Zaller cites the important case, among others, of the effect on mass opinion that followed once Democratic and Republican elites divided on civil rights issues circa 1964 (9–13).

How does this analysis of elite versus mass opinion bear on the question of elite versus mass competence? In his final chapter (which he separates from the main analytic purpose of his book by calling it an "epilogue" rather than a "conclusion"), Zaller acknowledges that his analysis implies that elites should have the most say in political debate. But, he asks, "If, as I have implied, only specialists are competent to conduct political debate, why bring the public into it at all? Why not let government policy reflect the preponderant weight of expert opinion?" (331).

Zaller is not persuaded by arguments that the people have an inviolate right to decide, or that participation has educative, expressive, or otherwise ennobling effects on participants. If the public had unlimited input in the political process, it might too often make decisions that were "morally abhorrent or technically stupid" (331). Still, more in the spirit of Madison than Schumpeter, Zaller allows that the public is needed as a check on government. Competing elites are not enough; nor is the constitutionally established separation of institutional powers, since it leaves open the possibility of a tyrranical, unified government if the judiciary is slow to oppose it. "Government, in the absence of checks, invariably goes astray" (331). So it seems that although the public has limited capabilities, it is at least minimally competent to provide a check against infrequent cases of gross (and, presumably, easily perceived) political incompetence, or worse.

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In 1962, V. O. Key wrote that

> The voice of the people is but an echo. The output of an echo chamber bears an invariable relation to the input. As candidates and parties clamor for attention and vie for popular support, the people's verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from the alternatives and outlooks presented to them. Even the most discriminating popular judgments can reflect only ambiguity, uncertainty, or even foolishness if those are the qualities of the input into the echo chamber. (Key 1962, 2–3)

Yet Zaller's conclusion is that this competition works well enough (in the United States) that it does not usually constitute the domination of the people by elites. Domination would be "a situation in which elites *induce citizens to hold opinions that they would not hold if aware of the best available information and analysis*" (313). For the most part domination does not occur because people's opinions are influenced by information disseminated by elites *who share people's existing political predispositions.* Thus, even though Zaller's analysis shows that the people does not think for itself, instead selecting its ideas "from the menu of elite-supplied options" (314), he is more sanguine than many of his readers might be about this situation, which deviates significantly from civics-text models of democracy.

Zaller's optimism seems to be based on two disputable points. First, he is confident that the mass public is able to determine which elites share its predispositions, so its interests and ideals can be served by leaving it to mainstream elites to decide what options to put on the policy and candidate "menus" (cf. Downs 1957, 230–34, and Lupia and McCubbins 1998); and he is confident that the media pick up and convey these elites' ideas and options, and that important non-mainstream ideas and opinions are not ignored. Second, Zaller places a great deal of implied emphasis on the word *available* in his definition of elite domination. To say, as he does, that elites do not often induce their followers to hold opinions different from those they would hold "if aware of the best *available* information and analysis" (313), is hardly the same as saying that elites do not induce opinions different from those they would hold if aware of the *best* information. "One can make one's best decision on the basis of the best *available* information," as Zaller himself notes, "and still be dead wrong" (312, emphasis added). In short, Zaller's optimism about the freedom of public opinion from elite domination need not translate into opti-

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mism about the competence of public opinion. Mass opinion may be wrong, because the best information available to (or conveyed by) elites may be wrong.

What is distinctive about Zaller's first assumption is that it downplays input from the non-elite grass roots. Zaller does not deny that the members of the mass public have genuine values or predispositions, but the only influence of these predispositions on the decisions people make in response to survey questions and in the voting booth is, according to Zaller's model, that they determine which elites' communications people are disposed to follow. From that point on, elites are autonomous, for they are the ones who produce the arguments and sound bites that comprise the flow of "considerations" that reach the public through the mass media. It is a sampling of considerations picked up from the media at a given moment that determines poll and election outcomes. This is not a very flattering portrait of the electorate, and it surely raises significant questions about the normative justifications of mass democracy. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, it is—like Zaller's second assumption—the basis of his relatively sanguine outlook. Acting together, the assumption that the public is capable of following elites that accurately represent its predispositions, plus the assumption that this allows the public to act upon the best "available" information, produces an optimistic outlook—but only when one uses a highly constrained ideal of democracy that expects neither autonomous intellectual engagement nor competent decisions from the citizenry itself.

How Elites Govern Us

Still, as Zaller suggests, there is a lot of evidence—or at least there are a lot of examples—showing that elites do reach judgments that are both correct and consistent with public predispositions, and that these judgments become the judgments of the public. Not that we can easily identify the "correct" judgment, but competition among elite opinions makes the persistence of incorrect or unrepresentative judgments much less likely. But there may be a sufficiently long time lag that the word "eventually" may have to be added to Zaller's conclusion that there tends to be adequate competition among elites' opinions.

Zaller uses the example of the American Psychiatric Association's

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position on homosexuality as a case in point. "In the period in which the American Psychiatric Association (APA), as the most authoritative source of secular understanding of this subject, regarded homosexuality as a disease," Zaller writes,

> press coverage of the issue was dominated by antihomosexual stereotypes. Thus, if one looks up homosexuality in *The New York Times Index* of 1950, one finds a request to see the perversion and scandal listings. But when the APA declared, by a poll of its membership in 1974, that homosexuality was no longer to be considered a disease, the press began to employ a "civil rights" frame of reference alongside the old "vice" frame, thus offering the public an alternative way of conceptualizing the issue of homosexuality. (316–17)

In this case, competing expert frames prevented elite domination. With competing elites come competing frames, improving the overall quality of information and analysis made available to the public. However, one problem with the APA example, to be considered further below, was that it took decades for elites to reevaluate their opinions, whereas some members of the public independently reached the APA's eventual conclusion long before it did. Another, related problem is that the turnaround at the APA must indicate that its judgment was, either before or after 1994, incorrect—or, to quote Zaller's distinction between the best information and the best "available" information—"dead wrong" (312).

Despite such examples as the change in the APA's—and subsequently the media's and the public's—view of homosexuality, the low bar Zaller sets for mass democracy to qualify as "undominated" makes his view quite pessimistic. We can see this by returning to the comparison of Zaller with Converse.

Where more impressionistic analysts before him, such as Walter Lippmann and Joseph Schumpeter, had denigrated the quality of public opinion, Converse used survey data to show (ostensibly) that "large proportions of an electorate do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis of intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time" (1964, 245). Given Zaller's debt to Converse, and Converse's praise of Zaller's work, it is tempting to think of them as being in the same camp. But while, in the concluding section of "The Nature of Belief Systems," Converse shows that the public fails to think in terms of the liberal-conservative ideological divide that animates elite discourse, he does not seem

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to be saying that the public cannot have competent and worthy individual or collective opinions; rather, the public is lacking *at the level of broad ideas* (cf. Stimson 1991 against Mayer 1992 and Page and Shapiro 1992). In Converse's own words,

> The broad contours of elite decisions over time can depend in a vital way upon currents in what is loosely called "the history of ideas." These decisions in turn have effects upon the mass of more common citizens. But of any direct participation in this history of ideas and the behavior it shapes, the mass is remarkably innocent. We do not disclaim the existence of entities that might best be called "folk ideologies," nor do we deny for a moment that strong differentiation in a variety of narrower values may be found within subcultures of less educated people. Yet for the familiar belief systems that, in view of their historical importance, tend most to attract the sophisticated observer, it is likely that an adequate mapping of society (or, for that matter, the world) would provide a jumbled cluster of pyramids or a mountain range, with sharp delineation and differentiation in beliefs from elite apex to elite apex but with the mass bases of the pyramids overlapping in such profusion that it would be impossible to decide where one pyramid ended and another began. (Converse 1964, 255–56)

Converse illustrates the difference between mass and elite attitudes with two cases showing how parties lead (or mislead) rather than merely aggregate public opinion. Converse notes that before the Civil War, the public voted for the Republican party more despite abolitionist ideology than because of it. For the most part, issues other than slavery influenced their votes. Only later, as North-South tensions heightened and led to war, did opposition to slavery became central to Republican support. However, although the mass public was not ideological along this (or any other) dimension, it did have "real" attitudes that were not organized by elite "menus." Clearly, in Zaller's analysis the Civil War could be considered an outcome of the competition among elites' ideas, but it hardly follows that the public did not have real attitudes.

Converse's second case is the early electoral success of the National Socialist party in Germany. Nazi election victories in the 1930s did not reflect support for Nazi ideology, according to Converse, but, rather, protest against Germany's economic collapse. Voters could have done better had they been attuned to the ideological stakes in-

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volved in voting for Nazi elites. Again, though, whether the result should be attributed to public or elite incompetence, the German public clearly did have real attitudes that were not driven by political elites. Thus, while Converse is pessimistic about the possibilities that the public can identify elites that share its predispositions or that it can make well-informed selections from elite menu choices, he *does* believe that the public is—precisely because of its ignorance of elite ideological orientations—somewhat more autonomous from elite domination than Zaller portrays it, when autonomy is defined more robustly than Zaller defines it.

Attitudes Without Elites?

What some readers find frustrating about Zaller's book is the extent to which it downplays attitudes that might not depend on elites and elite competition. Zaller's interpretation of the role of the APA in legitimizing homosexuality is a case in point. Alan Yang (1996) has argued that changes in attitudes toward homosexuality were not the result of a "top-down" process alone, but rather that grass-roots mobilization by gay-rights advocates brought about the APA's reexamination of the issue and may have moved public opinion before the APA's shift was able to do so. (Zaller does caution against attributing all power in such cases to "bottom-up" processes, noting that in some instances, elites "may lead by following" [268, 289]).

Similarly, it is clear that Americans have long had strikingly stable negative attitudes toward welfare dependence that were often at odds with the predominant elite view. Long before the 1996 welfare reforms, Americans had shown substantial opposition (ambivalence, at best) toward "welfare" (or "relief" as it was called in the 1930s). This attitude, clearly rooted in the American work ethic and the ethos of self-help, has given rise to longstanding public support for replacing "welfare" with work. By the same token, what has maintained Americans' stable support for Social Security is not only that it supports the elderly, but that it is funded by contributions based on people's work. Once Social Security was in place, the impact of elites on public support has been minimal: political leaders have long been constrained from tinkering much with Social Security, let alone reforming it, by the public's genuinely strong support for it (see Page and Shapiro 1992, ch. 4). It is not clear that Zaller would dispute any of this, since

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he does acknowledge the role of popular values and related predispositions. But relative to these, his book exaggerates the pliability of public opinion under the influence of *new* elite-evoked "considerations." One need not deny the possibility that the public's unwavering attitudes were settled in past elite-level debates in order to quarrel with Zaller's emphasis on current elite opinions.

To his credit, Zaller has acknowledged that in specific instances, public opinion apparently cannot be explained by conflict or consensus among elites. A case in point, which Zaller (1998) was the first to analyze systematically, is the effect on public opinion of the scandal that led to the impeachment of President Clinton. As the scandal unfolded, surveys showed that the public increasingly thought that Clinton had acted inappropriately. But, at the same time, Clinton's presidential approval rating rose (depending on the particular poll) from just over 50 percent to over 70 percent. This huge increase cannot readily be explained by the impact of elite consensus or dissensus—that is, by the direct impact of a single dominant message or conflicting messages from elites. Since the public was suspicious of Clinton as a person, conflicting opinions from elites should have produced essentially no net change in his approval rating. The apparently dominant frames through which the public viewed the issue—Clinton's performance *as president*, the nation's well-being, the trivialness of the episode, the behavior of the special prosecutor and journalists, and the like—seem to have been determined more by the public itself than directly by elites.

"Nonattitudes" Revisited

Of course, we can debate the relative autonomy of public attitudes only if the public has real attitudes to begin with. Zaller says it does not. But in that case, what do we make of the stunning trends revealed in Figure 3? Do we conclude that it does not show real attitudes and real attitude change toward working women? Or do we claim that changes in popular attitudes were driven by changes at the elite level, rather than by shifts in marital stability, average age of marriage, the availability of contraception, and the actual entry of women into the work force (see Page and Shapiro 1992, 101–2, 328–29). But even opinions that are changed by elites can be real ones.

Figures 4 and 5 provide two additional examples. Figure 4 shows

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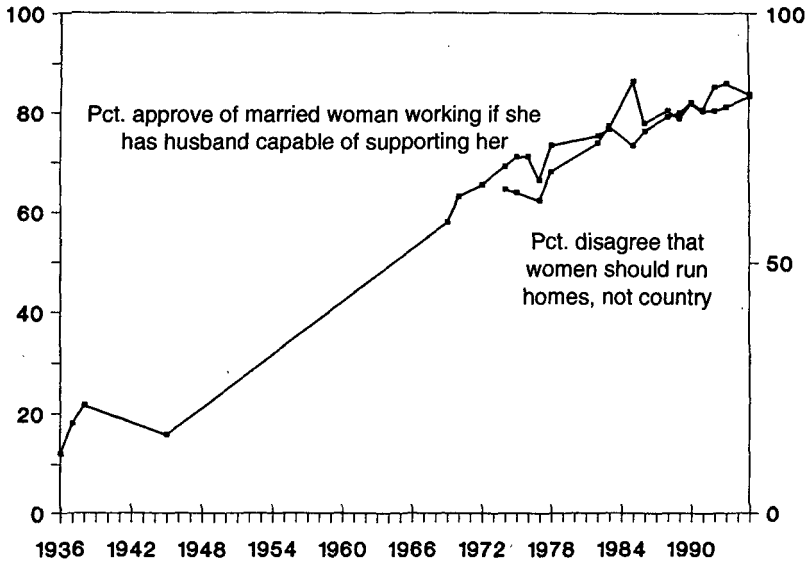
Figure 3. Attitudes Toward Working Women



Sources: Page and Shapiro 1992, 101, 403–404, updated by author.

the decisive end of isolationism after Pearl Harbor. Figure 5 shows the high level of public support for the Marshall Plan. This support was elite-driven, as Zaller's model would predict: President Truman was able to extract (though not easily) bipartisan support from Congress for the plan. But surely it was heartfelt nonetheless.

Figure 6 presents trends in responses to three different survey questions concerning national defense, all showing that support for doing and spending more on national defense reached its peak during the period of the Iran hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Here, both actual events and elites' intepretations of them were clearly at work, leading to what would seem to be enormous changes in real attitudes toward national defense (though Zaller [128–44] models the 1980–1982 change in the National Election Study data in a manner consistent with no real attitudes).

None of this should be startling to those who have followed the empirical research and analysis prompted by Converse's "nonattitudes" thesis. One of the most important tendencies of this research

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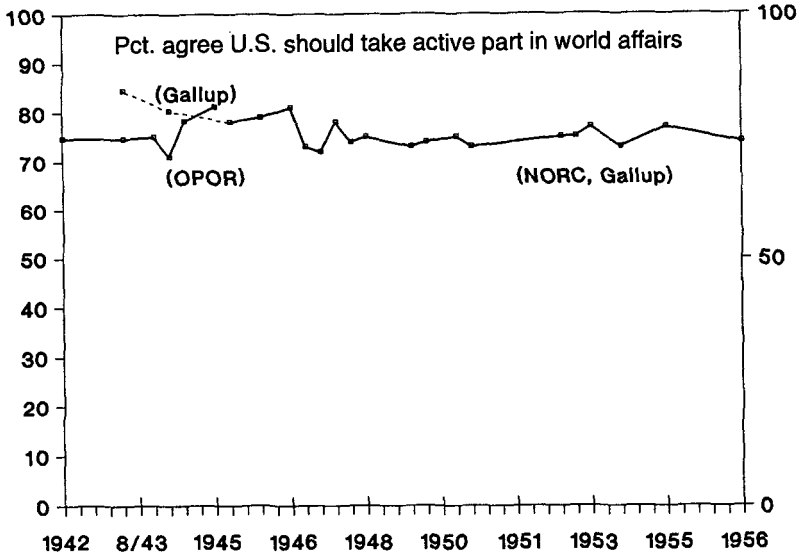
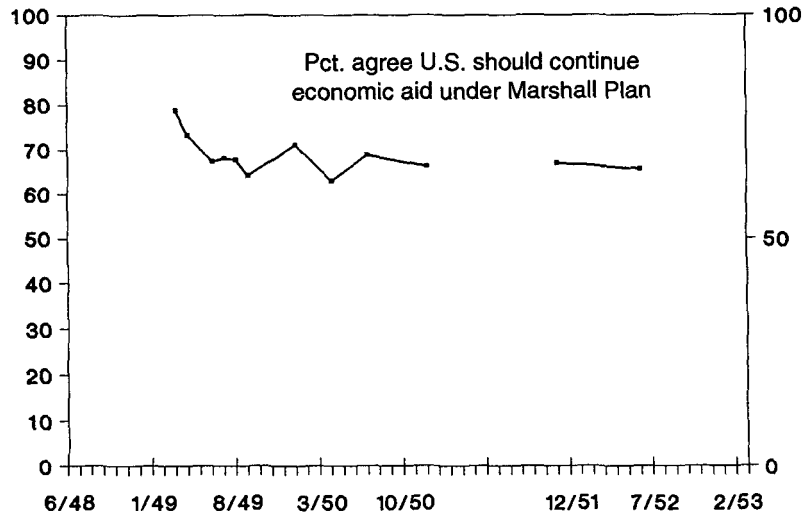
Figure 4. Foreign Policy Activism



Sources: Page and Shapiro 1992, 48, 399.

Figure 5. Support for the Marshall Plan



Sources: Page and Shapiro 1992, 59, 400.

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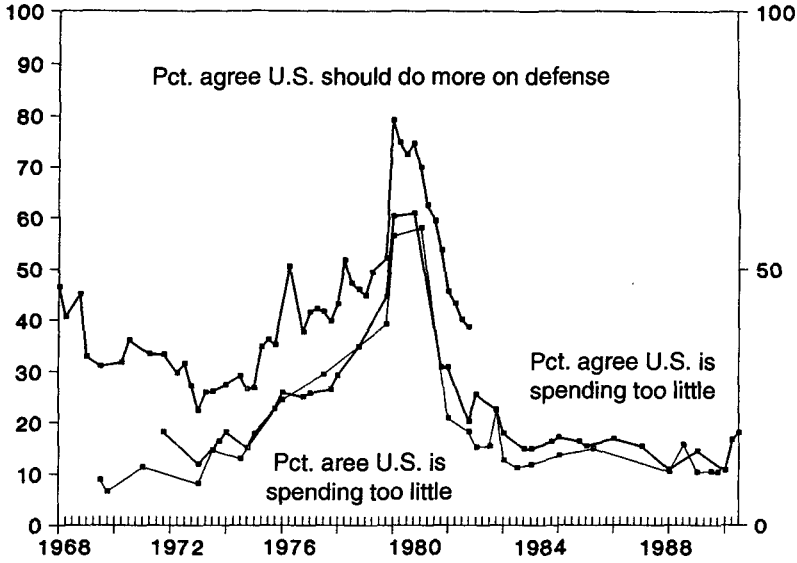
Figure 6. Support for Defense



Sources: Page and Shapiro 1992, 265, 416, updated by author.

builds on Converse's observation that within the mass public there are subgroups or "issue publics" that have attitudes on issues of special interest or concern to them. This is fully consistent with Converse's and Zaller's emphasis on the importance of *differential exposure to information*; indeed, one of Zaller's most important contributions might be for his work to revive interest in issue publics.

While Converse (1964, 244–45) originally concluded, for each of the eight issues he examined, "that large portions of an electorate do not have meaningful beliefs," he also wrote that "we come a step closer to reality when we recognize the fragmentation of the mass public into a plethora of narrower issue publics." Converse found that some survey respondents' answers displayed much greater response stability over time than others'. None of these issue publics were large, and they involved only eight issues during the three-wave panel over only four years. But, while the issues were selected for their salience and visibility, it is possible that respondents might also have been more "self-starting" on other issues about which they were not asked (see Elkins 1993).

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This picture inevitably changed when more issues were examined over longer time periods. In a 1993 essay, Donald Kinder and Don Herzog (1993, 355) report that "the political developments of the last twenty-five years have made clear that issue publics need not be confined to minuscule fractions of the public as a whole. Most Americans developed real attitudes toward racial busing, capital punishment, abortion, the war in Vietnam, affirmative action, and more. . . . When policy issues become entangled with moral, racial, religious, and nationalist loyalties, the nonattitude problem appears much less problematic." Converse (1996) himself has detected no great tension between such findings and his earlier work. He has speculated that the real world reflects the existence both of separate issue publics and "in a loose way a more general hierarchical model in which those who tend to monopolize information in one area also are well informed in others" (Converse 1986, 386).

The division of labor represented by issue publics is one way a competent public opinion can form across a wide range of issues despite widespread public inattentiveness and ignorance (see Neuman 1986). Zaller's model can be used to understand how issue publics can grow over time (that is, issue publics are *endogenous*, in both the short and long term), since it emphasizes the need for members of the public to be exposed to considerations through media coverage. The regular and visible coverage of an issue in the media when elites raise it and keep talking about it will tend to increase people's exposure to relevant considerations. The effect may be enhanced if the considerations touch on people's predispositions—their important values and loyalties—*and* if elites are united.

Where there is dissensus among elites on an issue, the public's dominant predispositions may make it more receptive to the messages from elites on one side than the other. In this case Zaller's polarization effect occurs due to changes among those with opposing predispositions *and* high levels of attentiveness to political information—issue publics that are often surprisingly small. Large attitude changes occur because newly salient information then reaches individuals who are not particularly attentive and who do not have strong predispositions to resist it.

Figure 3 shows one of the largest, if not the single largest, opinion changes to be found in public opinion data. It required a sea change in attitudes across individuals (although generational replacement also occurred; see Mayer 1992). Figure 7, similarly, shows changes by edu-

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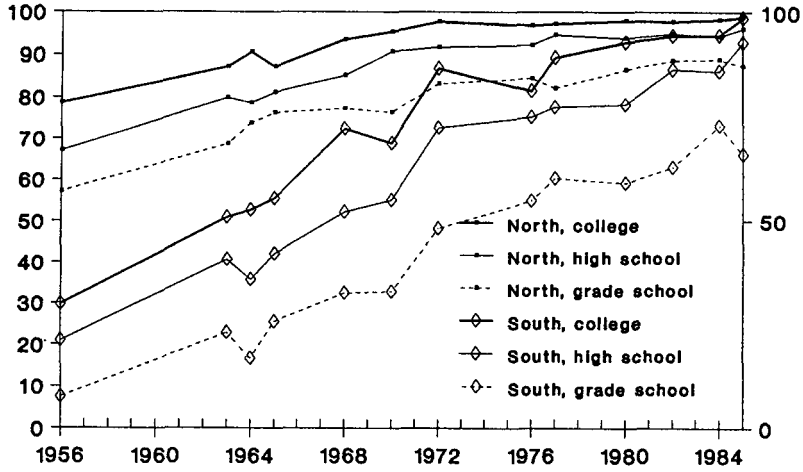
Figure 7. Racial Desegregation, Support by Education and Region



Sources: Page and Shapiro 1992, 785, 402, based on data from Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985, 78.

cation and region in support for the desegregation of public schools. Whether the information driving these attitudes came from elites or not, it clearly got through to all segments of the public, leading to largely parallel changes among all subgroups. The development of "parallel publics" illustrated in Figure 7 is the most common pattern taken by public opinion. By contrast, instances of selective exposure, receptivity, and opinion polarization of the sort on which Zaller concentrates are infrequent (see Dimaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Page and Shapiro 1992, ch. 7; Gerber and Green 1998; cf. Bartels 1994). This, however, says less about the complexity of Zaller's model than about the usual nature of political issues and the degree of elite consensus—that is, the overall information environment—in the United States.

Public Opinion and Democracy

The existence of "real" attitudes among both issue publics and the public at large, however, does not attest to the *quality* of mass opinion. The difference between elites who inform and those who manipulate

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the public is not the same thing, as we have seen, as the difference between a competent and an incompetent public. Even if the public does have real attitudes that are influenced by underlying values and predispositions as well as by elite-provided information, there is no guarantee that the underlying attitudes will be wise. The manipulative possibilities raised by wide variations in exposure to information can be overshadowed by variations in the extent not only to which elites provide the best *available* information, but the extent to which the available information constitutes the *best* information. There is also the question of whether elites represent the public's dispositions.

These concerns are addressed by new and important work on deliberative democracy (e.g., Fishkin 1995; Page 1996; Yankelovich 1991) and on whether individuals and the public have too often failed to acquire political knowledge and "enlightened" attitudes or preferences (e.g., Kinder and Herzog 1993; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Bartels 1990, 1996, and 1998; Austen-Smith and Banks 1996; Althaus 1998; Lindeman 1998). This work has critical implications for the questions of mass versus elite competence and the role of public opinion in modern democracy raised to new levels of sophistication by John Zaller's important book.

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Timur Kuran

INSINCERE DELIBERATION AND DEMOCRATIC FAILURE

ABSTRACT: *An enduring challenge of democracy is to give citizens an effective say in collective decision making by ensuring broad participation in political discourse. Deliberative opinion polling aims to meet this challenge by providing new opportunities for ordinary citizens to form educated opinions. This approach to broadening deliberation does not aim to control substantive outcomes, unlike conceptions of deliberative democracy that promote improved dialogue while also restricting the possible outcomes. But both classes of reform overlook the prevalence of democratic failures stemming from social pressures that discourage open and honest communication. New avenues for dialogue will remain clogged unless supported by political institutions that protect dissenters, and by a political ethic that rewards candor.*

On top of the charges leveled against democracy since Plato, recent critics have condemned the hollowness of democratic deliberation. It is said that politicians will not tackle certain entrenched problems and that neither the media nor academia fulfill their obligation to force these issues into public discourse. The result, it is further said, is a confused and generally ignorant citizenry that lacks the knowledge to judge either its representatives or its sources of information. However, the implication of this line of thought is usually taken to be the need for more democracy, or for more direct democracy, rather than

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less. It is argued that if political representatives will not take the lead on controversial topics, if the media prefer sensational stories to dispassionate analysis, and if academics are caught up in intellectual fads divorced from daily life, potentially huge benefits might flow from consulting the citizenry directly.

Limits of Democratic Deliberation

In *Who Deliberates?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), Benjamin Page offers a clue as to why taking issues directly to a sample of ordinary citizens might generate ideas and insights that differ systematically from those in the mass media. He analyzes the media's handling of three episodes—the Gulf War of 1991, the Los Angeles riots of 1992, and the 1993 discovery that Zoë Baird, the nominee for U.S. Attorney General, had employed illegal aliens in her home and failed to pay their Social Security taxes. Drawing his conclusions mainly from these three studies, Page skillfully shows that the media do not simply reflect the preferences and understandings of the citizenry at large or even those of the sub-populations that are knowledgeable about particular issues. Far from serving as neutral transmitters of popular aspirations and ideas, they pursue agendas of their own. Specifically, media outlets construct debates in such a way as to make their own positions appear reasonable, balanced, and enlightened. They also control the prominence with which stories are covered, select the quotations around which interpretations are built, and choose which facts to report. Although competition among media outlets mitigates the resulting distortions, by no means does it ensure the accuracy or completeness of the information available to citizens.

Consider the coverage that the op-ed pages of the *New York Times* gave to the debate over whether the United States should declare war on Iraq. To casual readers, the steady stream of editorials, columns, and letters might have given the impression of a free-wheeling debate that lived up to the ideal of open democratic deliberation. Page finds, however, that this impression was an illusion. The diversity of views was limited, and certain widely held views received little attention, if any at all. Moreover, certain kinds of relevant experts, such as Iraq specialists and civil-rights leaders, were essentially excluded from the discussion. The viewpoints featured on the editorial pages generally mirrored the debates within government circles, with none present-

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ing Iraq's side or questioning the legitimacy of intervention, and very few proposing serious negotiations. When a Kuwaiti woman told tales of Iraqi atrocities to a televised hearing of the House Human Rights Committee, the *Times* did not report that she was a relative of the deposed Kuwaiti rulers. Nor did it attempt to verify her claims, which turned out to be fabrications. Letters to the editor and opinion columns were arranged so that the newspaper's own editorial position—continue sanctions, with the possibility of force later, so as to induce a complete Iraqi capitulation—fell right in the center. Through this selection process, the *Times* (intentionally or unintentionally) made its own position seem moderate and temperate. In theory, Page cautions, voices speaking through other media outlets might have corrected the consequent informational distortions. But the *Times* carries enormous weight in foreign-policy deliberations, and most print and electronic media simply replicated its biases.

Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Americans outside the circles able to shape the direction of events remained mostly silent. They formed no mass movement to make themselves heard. The case of Zoë Baird shows, however, that under certain conditions the citizenry will shed its usual complacency. When Baird's nomination was announced, the media's initial reactions were almost uniformly positive, and the few misgivings involved mostly her ties to the business establishment. Moreover, her strong support continued even after the illegal hirings became public. For several days thereafter, major newspapers and television news programs continued to predict that Baird would easily win confirmation. Their optimism was based, we now know, on the views of bureaucrats, legislators, academics, reporters, and pundits who, possibly because many employed illegal aliens themselves, were inclined to consider Baird's offenses minor infractions unworthy of attention. This optimism betrayed a bias of America's politically vocal class, one that the rest of society tended not to share.

The public uprising against Baird's nomination started on talk radio, as outraged Americans called in to question how legislators could let a wealthy corporate lawyer get away with tax violations. The tone of the calls indicated that people who struggled to obtain legitimate child care had difficulty identifying with someone who broke the law when she could easily have obtained help through entirely legal means. The mainstream media, like the members of the Senate committee considering the nomination, began paying more attention to Baird's infraction, but at first they continued to predict

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confirmation. Only when the masses grew more indignant did officials and the media recognize that the illegalities constituted a scandal serious enough to sink the nomination. As they joined the chorus of opposition, Baird withdrew her name from consideration. The gap between the positions of the policy elites and those of the masses only narrowed when a mass upheaval forced the former to change.

It is tempting to conclude from this episode that, although the democratic process may work slowly, the desires of the people prevail in the end. However, as Page observes (101), this case was unusual. Baird's infractions were uncontested and easy to understand, because they were simple and were readily related to very widely shared experiences of parenthood. By contrast, most other policy debates involve complex issues that impinge on people's personal interests through channels they scarcely understand, limiting their ability to develop their own ideas. On matters like trade negotiations with Mexico, the Middle East conflict, savings-and-loan regulations, and even military involvement in Iraq, most Americans do not have well-formed personal positions, let alone ones they can articulate comfortably.

Page's analysis, though it captures a significant element of reality, also misses something important. While it is true that *most* people outside the circle of professional policy makers and communicators lack the skills to deliberate on complex social issues, *some* clearly have the requisite abilities. Also, the policy elites themselves are rarely unified on any given matter; whether the issue is Baird's confirmation or dealing with Iraq, both the media and policy makers ordinarily harbor individuals who disagree with the dominant position of the moment. But it is one thing to disagree, another to *express* disagreement. Whatever their social status, individuals may conceal misgivings about the dominant viewpoint and hide information that is inconsistent with the established consensus. They may even feign approval of widely supported positions so as to avoid personal criticism and to protect their reputation. Depending on the issue, some may take reputational risks if they know their dissent might make a difference. But this knowledge depends on the presence of a critical mass of vocal dissenters whose views cannot be dismissed as those of a small special-interest group or a deranged fringe. If such a critical mass seems unlikely to form, most potential dissenters may find it prudent to keep their expressed preferences and understandings within the range of mainstream debate.

What was striking about the Baird case was not only the simplicity

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of the legal infraction at issue. Equally notable was the failure of anyone to defend the actions that landed Baird in trouble. Even she acknowledged her mistakes and apologized for breaking the law. The consensus over her culpability meant that by criticizing Baird, citizens did not assume serious reputational risks. The lack of any dispute over Baird's culpability facilitated the self-identification of an outraged mass large enough to make the elites take notice.

In the case of determining the American response to Iraq's invasion, no preliminary consensus existed. Although practically no one sought to justify the invasion itself, until Operation Desert Storm, public discourse on the appropriate American reaction was divided. Even so, it appeared that supporting either side of the debate would open one to criticism, then or in the future; in particular, one might be accused of being unpatriotic for opposing the American military buildup or of being a warmonger for supporting it. Such risks militated against public participation in the debate. This, and the lack of consensus among ordinary citizens, allowed national policy makers and the media greater freedom of action than they would enjoy during the public revolt over the Baird nomination.

The Baird episode does not show, then, that mass democracy is consistently responsive to the wishes of the masses. Where the facts are complicated or the citizenry is divided, the elites may essentially do as they please. And even when the masses have their way, "debate" can be distressingly one-sided. The debate over Baird was more like a monologue both initially, when it was driven by elites, and subsequently, when it was driven by the general public. As Page notes, the uprising that forced Baird's withdrawal did not produce a calm examination of the many issues that her offenses raised. Were Baird's infractions the manifestation of a general child-care crisis that forced millions of parents to break the law? Did the fault lie partly with cumbersome procedures required of employers intent on paying their Social Security taxes? Might the standard imposed on Baird discourage many talented people from seeking office? And did Baird's many qualifications outweigh her misdemeanors? Senators conscious of such complexities refrained from bringing them up, lest they be accused of elitism or softness on crime.

However, the Baird controversy did, at least, stimulate broad political involvement, and it helped identify and diminish a gap between elite and mass judgments. Is this possible in a broader array of decision arenas? Can one construct institutions that would allow broader

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participation while also raising the quality of deliberation above that of the emotional outburst that sank the Baird nomination? Responding to such questions, various political theorists have proposed institutions to promote popular but also thoughtful deliberation on current issues. The most ambitious of these proposals is "deliberative opinion polling," the brainchild of political scientist James Fishkin.

Deliberative Opinion Polling

Fishkin's first major defense of his proposal appeared in *Democracy and Deliberation* (1991); he then refined his ideas in *The Voice of the People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). The challenge of modern democracy, he says in the former work, is to "bring some of the favorable characteristics of small-group, face-to-face democracy to the large-scale nation state" (1). In other words, it is to recreate the ideal of a New England town meeting in polities too large for everyone to know each other and too complex for them to follow every political issue.

Selected randomly from the general population, the members of a deliberative poll come together to discuss current political issues in a setting that encourages careful consideration of the facts, respectful listening, and open-ended learning. The meetings are televised, allowing even nonparticipants to educate themselves about policy dilemmas and possible solutions. Scholars and government officials are invited to join the deliberations, enabling them to communicate their expertise without needing to resort to slogans and sound bites. At the conclusion of the proceedings, the randomly selected participants are polled so as to reveal what the members of the polity *would think* if they had adequate opportunities to reflect on issues of the day.

Televised deliberations on political issues existed, of course, even before deliberative polling was conceived. From the earliest days of television, there have been political programs that feature lengthy debates and tough questioning by experts. And today, anyone with access to cable television is able to watch the proceedings of legislatures and assorted legislative committees. Fishkin considers deliberative polling different, on the grounds that its participants are representative of the entire nation rather than consisting mainly, and often exclusively, of distinguished policy makers and commentators. By virtue of its intentionally broader composition, it serves to attenuate the gaps between elite and mass views. Fishkin also claims, and considers it

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important, that the participants in a deliberative poll cannot be bought, as professional politicians and pundits frequently are.

By this logic, a deliberative poll conducted at the time of the Gulf crisis would have lessened the distortions of public discourse. By bringing into the open the differences between elites and the masses, it would have made the U.S. administration and the media more sensitive to viewpoints other than the narrowly circumscribed ones that received serious consideration. This is overly optimistic, however, because one can be given an opportunity to deliberate yet still be reluctant to express oneself thoughtfully and honestly. The very factors that keep professional deliberators from addressing risky subjects and taking sensitive positions can just as readily undermine the usefulness of deliberative opinion polling. Contrary to the impression that Fishkin (1995, ch. 1) gives, the participants in a deliberative poll need not shed their expressive inhibitions just because they were selected to perform a social duty. Nor is it likely that broadcasting their dialogue will bolster their willingness to speak their own minds. To make a statement before television cameras is to risk being showcased as a paragon of political incorrectness before a vast audience. This danger will ordinarily make participants think twice before uttering potentially controversial thoughts.

Consider President Clinton's 1997 town meeting on race in Akron, Ohio. Invited to share their reflections with others, the residents of Akron did not articulate anywhere near the diversity of ideas about affirmative action that anonymous surveys, for all their limitations, routinely pick up. Similarly, the Los Angeles jury that heard the criminal lawsuit against O. J. Simpson was, like the participants in a deliberative poll, selected to decide a controversial case on behalf of millions of citizens. Nevertheless, the jury abdicated that responsibility by refusing, after months of fine-grained testimony that riveted the nation, to discuss and weigh the evidence before it. Although it may be decades before the complete inside story of its "deliberations" comes to light, the reticence of at least some of the jury members, including perhaps all of its nonblacks, may well have been influenced by the prospect of having to explain how one might be convinced of Simpson's guilt without being a racist.

To be sure, there are issues that citizens assembled for a deliberative poll might not mind discussing honestly. But Fishkin does not rest his case on relatively uncontroversial issues. The promise of deliberative polling allegedly lies in its ability to enrich public discourse and

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achieve compromises on sensitive issues such as affirmative action, immigration, AIDS, Social Security reform, the distribution of educational funding, and school prayer. Yet it is precisely on such controversial matters that expressive inhibitions are apt to debase deliberative polls.

Perhaps social pressures suppress thoughts whose expression would be unwelcome anyway. But there is no way to prevent the expression of socially destructive thoughts without risking the concealment of ideas that, at the very least, merit consideration. A social climate that keeps genuine racists from expressing themselves honestly may also keep the supporters of color-blind government from publicizing misgivings about affirmative action. No system that publicly reveals people's preferences and ideas can overcome the problem of insincerity in political communication.

It is true that in Fishkin's system, the polling that follows the deliberations gives respondents the cover of anonymity. However, insofar as the discussions were afflicted by insincerity, any learning that occurred will have been shaped by the truncated, censored, and distorted thoughts that participants opted to communicate, rather than by the full extent of their knowledge and sensitivities. Consequently, such polling would not necessarily yield better results than ordinary polls.

Because modern communications have greatly raised the potential costs of saying something or even making a gesture that some powerful group will portray as insensitive, people take great care in expressing themselves in public settings. One of the essential qualifications of a successful modern politician is expressive prudence—the capacity to anticipate the possible uses to which a public statement can be put, and to take the necessary precautions. It is for this reason that politics is increasingly portrayed as a shallow and dishonest profession.[1] Politicians have not always had to monitor their expressions so carefully. Before the mass media penetrated every household, officials could more easily make statements offensive to powerful groups without destroying their careers. Having angered a group of listeners, they could defuse criticism by qualifying or reinterpreting the offensive statement, placing it in context, or pointing to a career of accomplishments against which one slip looks trivial. The technology of videotaping being unavailable, the controversial statement could not be replayed for general viewing, so such episodes were more likely to pass without permanent harm to the politician's career.

That hypocrisy and insincerity are critical problems of contempo-

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rary democracy is evident in the lampooning of politicians and the mockery of various forms of political correctness, left and right, in contemporary humor. The jokes told in comedy clubs, on talk shows, and on the Internet provide an outlet for insights, feelings, and inclinations that people ordinarily feel compelled to hide or deny. Shaftesbury ([1714] 1968, 71–72) captured the underlying process in terms that still ring true. "The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned and controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint," he wrote. "And whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged on their constrainers." He went on to argue that buffoonery will be most pronounced where the pressures against free expression are the heaviest. Although Shaftesbury's proposition has not been tested systematically, at least in modern democracies the correlation is probably strong. American comedians commonly make ethnic jokes (although usually relatively safe ones that poke fun at their own group); they rarely joke about matters on which public discourse is essentially free, such as local building codes.

Yet another result of political dishonesty may be the steady increase in ballot initiatives that allow individuals to bypass politicians and legislate directly through their own votes. In California, the state with the most voter initiatives, the 1990–1997 period saw 48 initiatives, compared to only 21 between 1950 and 1969 (Purdum 1998).[2] In November 1996, 23 states considered 90 initiatives on issues ranging from legislative term limits to allowing the medical use of marijuana. As Fishkin observes, plebiscites are flawed instruments for collective decision making. They may trample on the rights of minorities or violate constitutional principles; and, even when these dangers are avoided, they elude the fine-tuning obtainable through deliberation, negotiation, and compromise. Yet they provide voters low-risk opportunities for acting on grievances that politicians refuse to address. It costs opponents of affirmative action almost nothing to sign a petition for placing on the ballot a proposition that would prohibit it. Since the list of signers is not publicized, they can communicate their honest wishes anonymously, without subjecting themselves to the risks inherent in open dissent.

Putting an initiative on the ballot requires resources, which often come from special-interest groups that sense the existence of sharp inconsistencies between public discourse and the unarticulated private thoughts of the masses. These efforts may be popular precisely

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because they *avoid* deliberation and the attendant pressure for dishonesty. Consider the 1998 California ballot initiative against bilingual education for immigrants, which garnered a 61 percent majority. The teachers and bureaucrats who deliver bilingual education supported the practice to help the children of recent immigrants succeed in school. But polls showed that most people, including many immigrants, considered bilingual education an obstacle to the cultural assimilation and economic advancement of new Americans. For years, however, the few vocal opponents of bilingual education had endured charges of immigrant bashing and insensitivity to immigrant cultures—charges leveled by teachers, educational administrators, and policy elites in government, the media, and academia. This pattern is consistent with the suggestion that where we find democratic failure, its source lies mainly in obstacles to *sincere* dialogue, not inadequate opportunities for dialogue per se. The premise that seems to underlie Fishkin's proposal is, therefore, questionable at best.

To be sure, greater candor may raise social tensions by bringing into focus latent, previously unrecognized conflicts. But it may also have the opposite effect by revealing broad agreement on matters that had seemed deeply divisive. For example, it would show that a large majority of Americans oppose color-conscious policies.[3] Nor is race the only issue on which generally unrecognized agreements remain to be publicized. Through in-depth interviews with ordinary Americans of diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds, Alan Wolfe (1998) has discovered that agreement is far broader on the major issues of our time—immigration, welfare, racism, family, religion—than one would know from the ongoing culture wars in academia and the mass media.[4] Moreover, on certain issues where elites tend, at least publicly, to favor one particular view, ordinary Americans tend to think quite differently. For example, while toleration for unconventional lifestyles runs deep in the United States, it does not extend to gay rights—at least not yet. And while ordinary Americans generally favor continued immigration, they also believe in the ideal of the melting pot, now rejected by many vocal elites as a vehicle for cultural oppression.

Deliberation and Moral Conflict

The discrepancies between public opinion and private opinion, and between elite public opinion and that of the masses, do not exhaust

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the sources of tension that a healthy political system will keep in check through deliberation. In all societies, including those under democratic rule, an additional source of friction lies in moral conflict within and across individuals. These conflicts are unlikely to vanish merely by being made visible through a deliberative poll. Their successful resolution requires individuals to remain open to revising their moral judgments. This is the starting point of *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson. Observing that moral disagreement is a fact of life, Gutmann and Thompson argue that citizens should face up to their conflicts and reason together to arrive at mutually acceptable priorities.

However, Gutmann and Thompson do not want moral discourse to be a substantively neutral or undirected process. In contrast to Fishkin, whose open-ended deliberative polls may (in theory) generate any policy outcome whatsoever, they see deliberation not only as a vehicle for achieving moral peace but as an instrument for satisfying three substantive political principles—basic liberty, basic opportunity, and fair opportunity—through means consistent with three deliberative principles—reciprocity, publicity, and accountability.

Most Americans, if asked whether they share these principles, would undoubtedly answer that they do; practically all would agree, for instance, that freedom is a fundamental right and that all political players, from the president on down, ought somehow to be accountable for their actions. The crux of the Gutmann-Thompson enterprise thus lies in their interpretations of these principles, which essentially suit the policy goals of today's left-liberal elites. Conscious that Americans, given a full set of options, would resolve controversies over welfare, health care, preferential admissions, the environment, and abortion in ways inimical to the current left-liberal agenda, Gutmann and Thompson use their basic principles to rule out entire classes of outcomes as illegitimate. Nevertheless, they repeatedly point out that views detrimental to their favored agenda deserve a respectful hearing, even if they are denied the possibility of shaping policies.

In long segments of the book, Gutmann and Thompson attempt to put their three substantive principles into action. They argue, for instance, that these principles require organ transplants to be available to all who need them (30), efforts to combat racism through color-conscious remedies such as black teachers for black students (325) and black representation schemes that one could not justify for other

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groups (154), and a ban on exporting hazardous wastes to nondemocratic countries whose citizens lack an effective voice in their governments' decisions (149). Gutmann and Thompson insist that their principles provide a realistic blueprint for the good society. They suggest, therefore, that these principles lead to substantive positions that are not only morally defensible but socially feasible.

The overall argument suffers from internal inconsistencies, and its claim to realism lacks empirical foundations. To start with the logical difficulties, let us contrast Gutmann and Thompson's case against exporting waste products with their argument for race-conscious government. If it is illegitimate to export wastes to Namibia because the Namibian people *might* object, should we not question the legitimacy of race-conscious policies that a clear majority of Americans *do* oppose? Alternatively, if a countermajoritarian response is justifiable in fighting racism, why should the export of toxic wastes be opposed simply on majoritarian grounds? In neglecting to specify when majority rule is legitimate and when it is not, Gutmann and Thompson end up applying their principles selectively to meet predetermined goals. Because their principles are not adequately generalizable, even readers sympathetic to all of Gutmann and Thompson's own applications of the principles may reach conflicting policy conclusions in contexts they do not discuss.

Its inconsistency reflects an ambivalence that runs throughout *Democracy and Deliberation*. Gutmann and Thompson make it clear that the policy implications of their basic principles must be respected regardless of their popularity. Accordingly, if informed that most Americans oppose color-conscious policies, they would respond that such criteria must still be implemented because they are essential to fair opportunity. Yet they do not consider themselves antidemocratic. On the contrary, they consider it important that people's wishes be respected most of the time and in most contexts. They present no logical reason, however, why countermajoritarian policies should be the exception rather than the rule. Perhaps majorities should be overruled whenever serious issues are at stake. The authors minimize this possibility on the grounds that open deliberation, if conducted within the constraints they favor and in an atmosphere of mutual respect, would lead most people to accept the moral superiority of the left-liberal agenda.

This brings us to the book's lack of realism. Economic libertarians, fiscal conservatives, religious fundamentalists, and sundry other groups that fall outside the left-liberal tent would not accept the substantive

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constraints on deliberation that Gutmann and Thompson propose merely because they would retain the right to speak. Citizens who subscribe to other agendas will consider these constraints not as instruments for improving upon the existing democratic system but as tools for circumventing its requirement to seek consensus through genuine persuasion. Surely, many of them will see, or will be taught, that the opportunity to get a polite hearing for one's political views is meaningless unless these views have a chance of prevailing. If citizens are to treat their own claims as provisional, as they always should, they must know that citizens of different persuasions will do the same. Moreover, the expectation that deliberation alone will generate a consensus in favor of the left-liberal agenda is as far-fetched as it would be to suggest that enough exposure to scientific discussion would lead to the end of religion. Consequently, Gutmann and Thompson's political agenda cannot be implemented without coercion. Even an attempt to phase it in gradually would pose enormous dangers to basic liberties.

Another source of unrealism is that the argument fails to confront inescapable tradeoffs. It is one thing to decree that everyone ought to have free access to all forms of health care, another to meet the resulting demand. Health care must be rationed somehow, whether by governments, by free markets, or by "managed care" organizations. This is true regardless of whether one shares, for example, Gutmann and Thompson's view that it was immoral for Arizona's health-care program to deny certain indigents organ transplants that might have prolonged their lives; if transplants are not rationed, then some other form of health care, or investment in education, or something else, must be rationed instead. Yet *Democracy and Deliberation* provides no systematic guidelines for making such tradeoffs. Should a society subsidize organ transplants for octogenarians unlikely (but sometimes able) to survive the transplant operation? Do resource limitations not require policy makers to keep expensive projects with low expected benefits from crowding out projects with higher ones? The book neglects such questions because it simply assumes that deliberation would not produce an unfeasible set of requirements.

Democracy has no political or economic agenda of its own, and broad political participation need not produce moral standardization.[5] However, Gutmann and Thompson are right to suggest that a shared morality will facilitate the acceptance of policies that generate losers as well as winners.[6] They are also right to claim that open discussion can help a moral consensus to emerge. But is this necessarily a good

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thing? Like Fishkin, Gutmann and Thompson fail to take account of the social pressures that, in the course of producing consensus, militate against honest moral discourse.

Consider again the issue of rationing organ transplants. Whatever policy Arizona's legislature adopted, citizens partial to other policies would have considered the choice unjust—unless, perhaps, the policy had emerged from a sincere dialogue designed to find a broadly convincing consensus. Understandably, Gutmann and Thompson lament that the legislature did not justify its transplant restrictions to the applicants who were, or stood to be, rejected (30). But why did Arizona fail to produce the requisite justifications? Although the explanation is doubtless complex, the key point is probably that by articulating reasons for treating some operations as too risky or too costly, legislators would have risked attacks on their character. They would have been accused of playing God, heartlessly condemning to death those with the disease in question, or displaying animosity toward the poor. Facing the prospect of a tarnished reputation, prudent legislators thus voted for rationing and then quietly waited for new controversies to push the transplant issue out of the news. The motivation to retain social approval can easily overwhelm the courage to stand alone.

In keeping their insights to themselves, knowledgeable individuals impoverish public discourse, which impairs society's capacity to generate compromises and reforms. Certain positions appear publicly indefensible, even if they are widely shared. Under these conditions, private thought languishes as well, making problems seem insoluble. Thus, the social pressures that impel people to falsify their preferences, values, and knowledge can exact potentially huge social costs.[7] As a rule, less effort goes toward exploring solutions to problems on which public discourse is constrained than toward reflecting on problems that one can discuss honestly without endangering one's reputation.

Although institutions that promote and facilitate deliberation are essential to democracy, their usefulness is limited insofar as individuals feel compelled to censor themselves. At the very least, such institutions would have to be supplemented by a widespread ethic of sincerity that would instill a responsibility to express one's political convictions in public, both out of self-respect and out of concern for the welfare of others. And it would heighten the respect we feel for others' truthful expression, even when they support ends we oppose.

Arguably, however, Americans already adhere to an ethnic of sincerity. Dissidents of all creeds, nationalities, and persuasions are ad-

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mired here, perhaps more than anywhere else, for refusing to abjure their views even under severe pressure. This ethic does not, however, prevent tolerance for dissent from quickly dissipating whenever and wherever people consider their basic lifestyles under threat (McClosky and Brill 1983), and the examples I have cited, all drawn from American politics, suggest that sincerity readily crumbles in the face of social pressure. There may be deeper forces at work that make political sincerity incompatible with democracy itself. As Tocqueville ([1835] 1945, 255) recognized, "the moral authority of the majority is partly based upon the notion that there is more intelligence and wisdom in a number of men united than in a single individual." Under democracy, "the theory of equality is thus applied to the intellects of men." Insofar as a society accepts the linkage between numbers and moral legitimacy, its members are liable to fear going against the majority. Tocqueville's point might also explain why even those convinced that the majority is misguided are afraid to articulate their reasons: they know that the majority considers its moral superiority self-evident and will therefore believe in its right to intimidate dissenters.

An effective ethic of sincerity, then, would have to rest on the conviction that numbers alone provide no moral justification, that the majority can be wrong, and that intellects are not all equal. The spread of such an ethic would thus require a fundamental rethinking of the normative basis of democracy.

NOTES

1. Morgan and Reynolds 1997, esp. ch. 5, offers many relevant insights.
2. For a record and analysis of the trends up to 1990, see Allswang 1991.
3. My own work on preference falsification (Kuran 1995, chs. 9, 14) provides evidence of substantial hidden opposition to such policies. For complementary observations, see Steele 1990.
4. For supportive findings, see DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996. Hunter 1991 examines the culture wars.
5. A similar point is developed by Benhabib 1994.
6. Even the beneficiaries of a policy derive advantages from moral justifications of it, if only because otherwise it might weigh on their conscience. Accordingly, in promoting particular causes, moral treatises may give comfort to people who already accept them. Ordinarily, of course, the arguments advanced by any given moralist will reach not only people who stand to be comforted but also ones liable to be disturbed. The Gutmann and Thompson volume

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will comfort some readers and possibly unsettle others. For the details of this argument, see Kuran 1998.

7. For the underlying argument, see Kuran 1995, chs. 11–14.

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Philip E. Tetlock

THE EVER-SHIFTING PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC THEORY: DO CITIZENS HAVE THE RIGHT STUFF?

ABSTRACT: *Timur Kuran's* Private Truths, Public Lies *makes a compelling case that people often misrepresent their private preferences in response to real or imagined social pressures, that the relative power of competing interest groups to punish opinion deviance and reward conformity determines the patterns and pervasiveness of preference falsification, and that preference falsification helps explain such diverse outcomes as the persistence and sudden collapse of communism and the precarious persistence of racial preferences in the United States and of the caste system in India. Although preference falsification is important and raises questions about the legitimacy of the opinions expressed in opinion polls and elections, it does not seem widespread enough to warrant the conclusion that ordinary people lack the courage necessary to make democracy work.*

Political philosophers often make *ex cathedra* pronouncements about human nature. These anthropological declarations usually contain psychological tenets that dovetail suspiciously with the philosophers' prescriptive claims. It is perhaps no coincidence, for example, that many with communitarian sympathies take it to be self-evident that people are profoundly social creatures who are incapable of thinking of themselves as anything but an integral part of a symbolic social

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order (e.g., Sandel 1996). If the community is just as much a part of who we are as we are part of the community, it makes little sense to fret about each and every encroachment the community makes upon our liberty. By contrast, many libertarians take it to be self-evident that people are endowed with an inalienable sense of their own uniqueness as distinct individual entities and a creative capacity for self-determination (e.g., Nozick 1975). It thus makes a lot of sense for us to be vigilant against free riders who are eager to live comfortably off the fruits of our hard labor, and against moral busybodies who are continually concocting externalities (from second-hand smoke to global warming to the dehumanizing effects of pornography) that justify constraints on the rights of free citizens to enter into mutually beneficial contracts.

The closer these abstract arguments get to concrete controversies, the greater the likelihood that the parties will invoke actual evidence from the psychological research literature. And there is a veritable supermarket of evidence from which they can pick and choose. To be sure, the preponderance of the evidence portrays human beings as malleable, gullible, and susceptible to specious reasoning—an emphasis that those who favor an active regulatory role for the state often find congenial: people are not very good at making decisions for themselves, so perhaps we should protect them from themselves by turning the chore of choice over to regulatory philosopher kings (cf. Baron 1994). But the evidence is usually mixed and, even in those rare cases when it is not, there is invariably ambiguity about the soundness of the underlying research methods. There is also a vexing chicken/egg problem. Is the evidence more congenial to those of a moderately paternalistic, welfare-statist persuasion because those are just the facts (don't blame the delivery boy), or because the psychologists themselves have a political agenda (it is no secret that most psychologists are decidedly on the left in both their private and public views)?

Timur Kuran's *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997) can be usefully viewed in the context of this ongoing struggle in which distinguished political philosophers, eclectic social scientists, and gritty political partisans alike construct images of human nature that substantiate their preferred approaches to the governance of the beings whose essence is being contested. The stakes are high and often the participants are not above playing fast and loose with the

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facts. Egregious simplifications—especially those embodied in those hardy subspecies, *Homo economicus* and *Homo sociologicus*—abound. Kuran's book provides refreshing relief from this partisanship. Although he is an economist and one might expect him to come to the table with a strong commitment to a certain view of human motivation and rationality, he deviates quickly from the neoclassical orthodoxy. He proposes instead a nuanced and multidimensional scheme for thinking about the motives that citizens might have when asked their views on an issue. Kuran distinguishes three types of utility that people balance as they reflect on policy questions: intrinsic utility (What's in it for me and mine?), reputational utility (What types of conclusions will various classes of significant others draw about me if I answer one way or the other? Will they think I am a racist, a liberal wimp, a fellow traveler . . . ?) and expressive utility (What gratification will I derive from knowing that I have been true to myself?). Kuran's theory of decision making follows straightforwardly: people choose to endorse the option that they believe, correctly or incorrectly, maximizes the weighted sum of these three utilities. Kuran chastises traditional economists for equating intrinsic utility with total utility—an equivalence that only holds, in Kuran's view, when people perceive absolutely no benefits to be obtained from misrepresenting their preferences to various audiences. But he could equally rightly fault self-presentation theorists for focusing solely on reputational utility (Goffmanesque man is pretty one-dimensional) and trait psychologists for assuming too quickly that what people say they think stands in one-to-one correspondence with what they do think. *Déformation professionelle* afflicts all of us, albeit to varying degrees.

Falsifying Public Opinion

An important part of Kuran's argument stems from recognizing that people often misjudge the positions that others hold as well as the consequences of implementing particular policies. Kuran does not, however, make his mark by adding to the already massive body of work on errors and biases in social perception. Rather, his most elegant and distinctive contribution lies in working through the logical implications of what happens when conflicting interest groups of varying size, status, and cohesiveness engage each other in the battle for public opinion. The net result of the operation of conflicting

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pressures on an initial distribution of public opinion is not always intuitively obvious. Sometimes we get convergence on a unique equilibrium, although there is no guarantee that it will be an "interior equilibrium" lying between the two contending factions. Kuran argues that "corner and near-corner equilibria" are historically common and points to the aftermath of the Spanish Inquisition (a homogeneously Catholic population) and the aftermath of America's intensive legal and public-relations campaign against racism in the late twentieth century (a society in which overt racism has yet to be completely eliminated but has been decisively marginalized). Moreover, there is no a priori reason why public opinion must always converge on a single equilibrium. Kuran is open to the idea of multiple equilibria and to the possibility that relatively minor chance events can tip the balance in the direction of dramatically different equilibria. History is, in this view, largely a path-dependent meander: which path we take is often under the control of invisibly small forces and there is no principled basis for ruling out close-call counterfactuals of the form "but for that dreadful or uplifting speech at that moment, the vote would have been 65/35 rather than the other way around." This willingness to savor indeterminacy represents another serious deviation from neoclassical orthodoxy.

The most entertaining chapters explore the social processes of preference falsification through three case studies: the persistence and sudden collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the persistence of the Indian caste system, and the persistence of racial preferences in the United States. In each case, Kuran runs up against a major empirical obstacle. Lacking the means to read minds and to discover people's true preferences, he cannot specify exactly how pervasive preference falsification is (a problem to which we shall return). Accordingly, Kuran must make his case obliquely and circumstantially. First, in each case, he documents that systematic social pressures from well-positioned elites inhibited open challenges to the policies in force. Depending on the character of the political order, dissenters risk their reputations, friends, jobs, freedom, or lives. Second, in each case, he shows, prima facie, that there is only limited popular support for the policies in force but surprisingly little open opposition. Third, he makes skillful use of experimental work on the "fundamental attribution error," which shows that people are too quick to jump to confident conclusions about the attitudes of others from unreliable behavioral evidence. Drawing on this work, he argues that people

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often falsely conclude from the lack of open opposition that there must be considerable support for the status quo, and that they adjust their public positions accordingly to minimize the risk of ostracism. Public opinion can thus remain locked in a state of ignorance for protracted periods. Whether and when the dam bursts—be it on a chilly winter morning in 1989 in central Bucharest or a sunny summer Tuesday in 1996 in California—is inherently unpredictable.

These cases and other examples of preference falsification are not, however, as similar as Kuran occasionally portrays them. There may well be abrupt discontinuities in the underlying processes of preference falsification as they unfold in societies of varying oppressiveness. At the mild end of the oppressiveness continuum, we might place laboratory and experimental survey research in Western democracies that attempts to manipulate people's beliefs about the relative popularity of various policy positions by presenting false statistics or by providing not-so-subtle clues concerning the interviewer's policy preferences. Under the right circumstances, these studies often produce opinion shifts, but it is not entirely clear what this means. One possibility is that respondents are misrepresenting their private positions; another is that respondents are actually modifying their private views in response to the real or imagined arguments that they attribute to others. The latter possibility should be of interest not just to social psychologists who specialize in the esoterica of social influence, but also to students of politics who care about the conditions under which pro- or anti-regime attitudes acquire legitimacy in the eyes of the general population. Some conformity effects are best understood as manifestations of "normative influence": people don't believe what they are saying but understand that sometimes, to get along they must go along. Other conformity effects are best understood as manifestations of "informational influence," in which respondents implicitly work through the following reasoning process: "Many people I respect seem to have good grounds for believing x. I should try to think of what those grounds might be. Ah, now that I have thought about it, I can see that they think that way because of y and z. I will move my position closer to x." In the case of informational influence, genuine attitude change can be said to have occurred—change that should persist even when people think their views are not being monitored, and sometimes even when people are exposed to arguments in favor of their original position.

At the severe end of the oppressiveness continuum, Kuran presents

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the case of Anna Akhmatova, the Russian poet who was placed under enormous pressure by the Bolshevik regime to praise the Great Leader. Finally, when her son's life was at stake, she recanted and obediently wrote panegyrics to Stalin. No doubt, some people living under blatantly oppressive regimes falsely infer from the absence of open dissent that there is close-to-unanimous support for the regime. But Anna Akhmatova was under no such illusions, and millions of others in like circumstances complied with demands for ritualistic expressions of loyalty for reasons like hers. Indeed, forced-compliance experiments—pioneered by cognitive-dissonance theorist Leon Festinger—show that people (Akhmatova among them) are much *less* likely to bring their private attitudes into line with their public behavior when that behavior is transparently under the control of external threats or bribes (Wicklund and Brehm 1976). This leads to the moderately counterintuitive conclusion that there will typically be more profound attitude conformity in societies in which conformist pressures are communicated relatively subtly (not so subtly that people miss the signal, but not so heavy handedly that everybody realizes why everyone else is towing the party line).

Of course, social pressures toward conformity are rarely as mild as they are in anonymous survey interviews or as severe as the threat of a one-way ticket to the gulag. An interesting intermediate case (although certainly closer to the mild end) is the debate over remedies for racial inequality that has loomed large in American politics over the last three decades. Kuran documents substantial social pressures on white Americans since the mid-1960s to avoid expressing views that could plausibly be labeled as racist. One case in point was the vilification of Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1965 when, as assistant secretary of labor, he published a policy paper (the infamous Moynihan Report) warning that the breakdown of the black family through divorce, separation, and desertion was depriving black children of the self-confidence, discipline, and work habits that are among the key determinants of achievement. Kuran observes that the widespread branding of Moynihan as a "subtle racist" prevented a serious discussion and policy response to a problem that was already apparent in 1960 but had reached devastating proportions by 1990 (during which time the proportion of all black households headed by single parents went from one in four to one in two). A second and equally depressing tale comes from James Coleman (1994), who offers a moving account of how he failed to pursue the implications of research findings

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that ran against the egalitarian grain of elite academic culture. In the mid-1970s, he discovered both that students' verbal achievements depend on their teachers' scores on vocabulary tests and that, as a group, black teachers trained by segregated schools scored low on such tests. These findings raised the dissonant possibility that, whether white or black, students taught by black teachers would tend to be at a disadvantage relative to peers taught by white teachers. Whether Coleman failed to pursue this finding because he believed devoutly in the "role-model" hypothesis, or because he did not want to add to the burdens of an already long-suffering group, or because he could do without the notoriety, Coleman concedes that this failure had real costs. It obscured the pressing need to improve the skills of teachers, especially teachers in black communities.

Here it is worth stressing the role that social scientists can play as enforcers of political correctness. In the last two decades, leading survey researchers (Kinder and Sears 1981) have labeled a large number of Americans "symbolic racists" with no more evidential warrant than that these respondents opposed government-imposed school busing to desegregate schools or that they opposed racial preferences. Indeed, symbolic racism was operationally equated with opposition to these policies. Research of this sort has lent the imprimatur of science to harsh and inaccurate accusations directed at those who would once have been considered paragons of color-blindness. As Kuran is well aware, the labels that researchers attach to publicly expressed opinions can be as potent as their actual research.

This process piles paradox upon error. About 12 years ago, Paul Sniderman and I wrote a controversial article on the standards of evidence that leading public opinion researchers used in labeling points of view "symbolically racist" (Sniderman and Tetlock 1986). We proposed a thought experiment: imagine that a group of McCarthyite researchers in the 1950s used exactly the same standards of proof in pursuit of "symbolic Marxists" that liberal researchers in the 1970s used in pursuit of symbolic racists. The symbolic-Marxism research team would rely on inherently multidimensional questions that equated the endorsement of left-wing values with anti-American sentiments—a direct parallel to the symbolic-racism researchers' strategy of relying on questions designed to equate conservative values with anti-black sentiment. Just as the symbolic-racism researchers operationally defined symbolic racism (among other things) as opposition to affirmative action and mandatory busing programs, so one

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could operationally define symbolic Marxism as opposition to American aid to right-wing regimes resisting communist insurgencies and as support for the civil liberties of suspected American communists. Such exercises, we suggested, had no place in social science—they amounted, to borrow C. Wright Mills's phrase, to "motive-mongering." A respected colleague who read a draft of this paper told me flat-out not to publish it. In her view, writing this critique was not only a stupid career move but morally wrong. It was morally wrong because, even if the methods of the symbolic-racism researchers were flawed, their conclusions must be fundamentally right: covert racism was obviously a powerful force that needed to be exposed. In short, her (mis)reading of public opinion would have dictated that we encourage public preference falsification among conservatives anxious to avoid the "symbolic racisim" tag by disowning their opposition to busing and preferences—and that we do so by falsifying our own views by keeping silent.

Assessing Preference Falsification

Notwithstanding his impressive command of the psychological literature, Kuran but skims the surface of the range of ingenious methods for gauging properties of attitudes that people would prefer not to acknowledge (for partial reviews, see Crosby, Bromley, and Saxe 1980 and Tetlock and Manstead 1985). For convenience, I divide these methods into three broad classes:

(a) Content/structural analysis of texts. In extremely oppressive regimes, the overt dissenters are dead or behind bars, so one has to search for subtle textual signs of dissent in speeches and other ritualistic assertions of loyalty. But the speakers know that agents of social control are also looking for the same clues. Under these circumstances, it is remarkable that we can ever detect implicit dissent, but sometimes we can (Tetlock 1988). For instance, standard content analyses of political rhetoric did not allow us to differentiate Gorbachev from other regional party secretaries in the early 1970s. Like any good apparatchik, he praised the inspiring leadership of Leonid Brezhnev and promised renewed dedication to the Marxist-Leninist cause. He did, however, differ from fellow apparatchiks in the "integrative complexity" of his utterances. He was much more likely to encourage the audience to think in self-critical ways and to explore

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alternative ways of doing things (although, of course, always within prevailing strictures).

(b) Experimental manipulations in survey research. In less oppressive societies, researchers still need to be sneaky in their quest to find "stealth attitudes," but at least they can directly ask people questions that bear on the subject of interest. For example, one study (Kuklinski, Sniderman, Knight, Piazza, Tetlock, Lawrence, and Mellers 1997) unobtrusively measured the racial attitudes of a representative sample of Americans by asking people how many items (but not which ones) in a list of three or four statements made them angry. Respondents were randomly assigned to three experimental conditions. In the control condition, respondents received only non-racial items (such as "baseball players making millions of dollars" and "corporations polluting the environment"). In the old-fashioned-racism condition, respondents received the same list plus the item "a black family moving in next door." In the new-civil-rights-agenda condition, respondents received the same list plus the item "black leaders demanding more affirmative action." The underlying idea was simple: even people who do not openly say that they are angered by the prospect of a black family moving in next door or by demands for affirmative action might well acknowledge such anger if they are assured that the interviewer cannot possibly figure out which of the items is infuriating them. The results resoundingly supported Kuran's intuition that resentment of affirmative action is widespread (even among ideological liberals), as well as his hypothesis that old-fashioned racism is indeed in deep decline, albeit far from being a negligible force in certain regions of the United Statea.

Followup research employing the same methodology by Martin Gilens, Paul Sniderman, and James Kuklinski (1998) further demonstrated that preference falsification—measured by discrepancies between direct expressions of attitudes and responses to the indirect questions posed by the list experiment—was confined almost exclusively to liberal whites committed to the values of racial equality and harmony. These respondents were approximately 25 percent more likely to express anger over affirmative action when they thought the interviewer could not determine that it was affirmative action that was provoking their wrath. Conservatives apparently saw little need to duck (a result that is in tension with Kuran's portrait of American public opinion on affirmative action) but liberals, perhaps loath to be

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labelled as symbolic racists, definitely do duck in politically significant numbers (a result that nicely complements Kuran's analysis).

Another approach to assessing disguised attitudes rests on the assumption that people will act out such an attitude only when they can invoke a suitable justification that permits them to keep it concealed (Sniderman, Piazza, Tetlock, and Kendrick 1991). For example, a savvy symbolic racist should not treat otherwise identical white and black applicants for government aid differently. To do so would obviously undercut her reputation for fair-mindedness. But what if we experimentally manipulate the question wording so that different subgroups of survey respondents are asked to react either to a white or a black unemployed person in need of government help who has either a good or a poor history of prior employment? We can thereby assess, for the population as a whole or specific subgroups such as conservatives, whether people are especially likely to seize on the nonracist ideological justification for denying aid to the claimant (violation of a traditional value such as self-reliance) when the claimant is black as opposed to white. Here the results were also quite decisive: there was little evidence that Americans in general or conservatives in particular are latent racists waiting to pounce on the first good reason that comes along to deny blacks (but not whites) help. If anything, the opposite was the case: conservatives pounced on the first good reason that came along to help blacks (but not whites). Although conservatives were more disinclined than liberals to help people (blacks or whites) who were not trying to help themselves, conservatives were especially inclined to help African Americans who had good work histories and needed a job.

(c) Laboratory methods. Yet another approach to ferreting out hidden attitudes relies on a fundamental principle of cognitive psychology: namely, the power of recent events to prime or facilitate the interpretation of relevant concepts and events stored in the associative networks of human memory. Imagine, for example, that we ask people about the connotations of words (Is word X "good" or "bad"?) and measure how many milliseconds they need to answer each question. The first word presented is "spider," which most people evaluate negatively. Presentation of this word should automatically activate a negative evaluation stored in memory. If the next word—say, "disgust"—also triggers negative affect, then people will be able to indicate the connotative meaning of that word more quickly. We can use this basic property of the human mind to assess racial attitudes surrepti-

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tiously: for example, by presenting pictures of white and black faces and observing to what degree and for which respondents reaction times to words with negative or positive connotations have been facilitated or depressed. Researchers have shown that this type of indirect measure of "prejudice" is a better predictor of subsequent behavior toward African Americans than conventional self-report measures that rely on willingness to reveal one's private feelings (e.g., Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, and Williams 1995).

It may, however, be time for an ironic aside. In pursuit of hidden attitudes—such as racist attitudes in late-twentieth century America—it is easy to lose sight of the forest by focusing our microscope on the tree bark. There is an enormous gap between supporting de jure segregation or turning a blind eye to KKK atrocities and allowing a fleeting delay in responses to words presented after exposure to black faces. We have come a long way from the Selma, Alabama of 40 years ago if we have now reached the point in our history when white racism must be measured in milliseconds or, for that matter, when the meaning of "racism" in attitude scales must be stretched to cover the full spectrum from mass murder designed to achieve ethnic cleansing to opposition to affirmative action programs designed to help black millionaires buy radio stations.

Although Kuran dwells on the unfortunate effects of widespread preference falsification, he recognizes that it may sometimes be just as well that certain points of view have been driven into political extinction. Some will argue that America needed to pass through a protracted phase of color-conscious remedies and repressive speech codes to overcome its dismal legacy of racial oppression. No less shrewd an observer of human nature than Joseph Stalin was fond of the folk saying, "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs." And if that association is too unsavory, the political architect of America's civil-rights revolution, Lyndon Johnson, was fond of a far cruder bit of folk wisdom bearing on the same theme: "Grab them by the balls and their hearts and minds will follow." It may, in this view, have been salutary to have bullied the bigots into silence, forcing them into the proverbial closet. On the other hand, a pretty good poet (William Blake) inserted an instructively cautionary aphorism among his Proverbs of Heaven and Hell: "You never know you have had enough until you've had more than enough." Kuran makes a compelling case that, regarding racism, American society has passed that negative-feedback threshold.

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Preference Falsification and Democracy

Kuran has added to the formidable list of ways in which the "crooked timber of humanity" can warp the best-laid plans of democratic theorists and social engineers (cf. Berlin 1992). In their quest to fit in and to avoid standing out, people may often say things to pollsters that they do not believe and even express support for candidates they heartily dislike. We should not panic, however. People are not as weak-kneed, and democracy is not as vulnerable to conformity pandemics, as the strongest form of the preference-falsification argument suggests. The strongest form of the argument would lead us to expect that, even in relatively competitive electoral systems in which no single point of view possesses close-to-monopoly control of the media, people could often be successfully coralled into corner equilibria (where virtually everyone feigns or truly endorses a single politically correct position). Coralling would be easy because people buckle so readily under even minimal social pressure. Only the most socially cohesive, ideologically committed minorities should be able to sustain themselves in such a world. All others should crumble as more and more defectors abandon the minority view in response to the real or imagined disapproval of the majority.

This form of the argument is not sustainable, and I doubt that Kuran would endorse it. What Kuran calls interior equilibria, which entail open dissension between conflicting factions, are just too common in the modern world (arguably far more common than corner equilibria). Minority viewpoints frequently persist and thrive under a wide range of democratic systems and cultural contexts. Here it is worth noting two powerful psychological reasons why minority points of view often prove robust in the face of majoritarian pressures. First, people are not nearly as pliable as the strongest forms of the preference-falsification argument require them to be. Experimental research on survey respondents reveals that, if we want to move public opinion substantially in one direction or another, we need either to give people good reasons to move or to frame the issue so as to motivate people to generate such reasons on their own. Most respondents are pretty good at seeing through the purely hand-waving arguments that interviewers in some experimental conditions throw at them—informationally empty arguments of the form, "After considering how complex this issue is, do you still feel the same way?" If

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people were exclusively concerned with avoiding disapproval, one might suppose that they would take the hint and duck for attitudinal cover by endorsing whatever opinion the interviewer seems to be promoting. But the overwhelming majority do not; they shift their positions only when they feel they have been provided a set of reasons that are compatible with their basic political beliefs and values. Second, dissenting views may sometimes persist not despite their minority status, but rather because of it. Some researchers hold that people have two often-conflicting needs—to belong to a collective entity that confers an element of security, and to be distinctive by affirming their personal uniqueness. The quest to "individuate" oneself can, to be sure, be trumped by the painful penalties imposed by oppressive regimes, but the need to assert one's individuality is usually strong enough in relatively wealthy and tolerant societies to override the tokens of disapproval that majorities are allowed to mete out to dissenters.

Whereas the strongest form of the preference-falsification argument is threatening to democracy but psychologically dubious, the weaker versions are psychologically more defensible but lose much, although not all, of their political sting. I would be inclined to adopt a moderate version of the preference-falsification position myself, a position that concedes that reputational costs and benefits loom large for many citizens in deciding what stands to take on selected issues, and that preference falsification can occasionally lead to serious misreadings of public sentiment and to inefficient collective choices. But the moderate preference-falsification position would also portray people as possessing enough social backbone to resist being blown over by each and every gust of public opinion, and enough cortical capacity to weigh the relative strengths and weaknesses of the arguments that conflicting factions advance in the competition for public approval. In a nutshell, the democratic sky is not falling, or, if it is falling, it is not due to the social dynamics of preference falsification.

Finally, it is instructive to place the preference-falsification argument in the broader context of other psychological and quasi-psychological arguments that, since Plato, have been advanced to demonstrate either the impossibility or the undesirability of true democracy (however political theorists might define that elusive construct). Many of these arguments possess considerable merit. There are good grounds for fearing that people lack the right psychological stuff for full-fledged democratic citizenship. But these arguments are

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far from conclusive and are often in deep tension with each other. It may make sense to talk in the singular of *Homo economicus* or *Homo sociologicus* (these are convenient caricatures of human nature that allow theorists of social systems to get on with their work); it definitely does not make sense to talk of *Homo psychologicus* in the singular. No one yet knows exactly how to fit together the mosaic of sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory research findings in political psychology.

Consider this cursory sketch of the current state of knowledge. Kuran fears that many people do not have the intestinal fortitude to stand by their convictions, and he worries about the quality of reasoning behind those convictions they do stand by. In a recent influential book, John Zaller (1992) gives us reason to worry that most people on most issues lack convictions altogether—that they are either too ill informed to have formed attitudes on key issues of the day, or are so mentally lazy that the opinions they have formed are merely evanescent top-of-the-head responses that reflect whatever random thoughts have most recently drifted into their streams of consciousness. But it was not so long ago that some leading social scientists adduced evidence that many people had all too many opinions—intolerant, nasty, and emotionally charged opinions that they were more than willing to share, indeed impose, on others (Adorno et al. 1950; Allport 1954; Altemeyer 1990; Stouffer 1955). And there is an influential branch of the *Homo economicus* school of thought that faults citizens who belong to special-interest groups (and that includes most of us) not for being too clueless to figure out how to advance their interests in the body politic, but for being all too clever and ruthlessly effective in their efforts to do so (the cumulative effect of which is "demosclerosis": Olson 1982; Rauch 1995).

Each view of human nature highlights a potential doomsday scenario for democracy. Which view captures the truth? Speaking as a social psychologist (and I fear that occupational credential should carry little weight in this debate), I would venture to say none of them. Each is extraordinarily selective. Experimental work on judgmental and choice heuristics and on the voluntary provision of public goods reveals that most people are neither as clever nor as self-absorbed as portrayed by public-choice theorists (cf. Dawes 1998)—although some elites may well be, and that may suffice for the purposes of this theoretical approach. Experimental research on survey respondents suggests that most people are neither as empty-headed nor as

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muddle-headed as some students of political cognition have portrayed them (cf. Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). Research on the persuadability of citizens on pressing policy issues of the day suggests that most people are not chameleons who are so desperate for social approval that they take on whatever ideological colors will get them through the current social event, no matter how silly the arguments they are asked to endorse (cf. Sniderman, Fletcher, Russell, and Tetlock 1996). Historical trends suggest that only a hard-core few are as incorrigibly ethnocentric, punitive, and mean-spirited as the classic work on authoritarianism implied in the 1950s—although only a few may be sufficient to jump-start nasty interethnic feuds, and the ranks of the intolerant can swell during hard times and at moments of crisis.

Of course, announcing that the democratic sky is not falling hardly makes for good copy. It is more exciting to suppose that things are falling apart and that one knows why and how to fix it. The truth is less dramatic. Citizens do have at least some principles that anchor at least some of their attitudes (even if those principles do not faithfully reflect the ideological abstractions that dominate elite debate—Sniderman et al. 1991); citizens cannot easily be bullied into abandoning strongly held attitudes, but they are reasonably responsive to well-crafted arguments (Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999); and, although citizens do fall short of the utility-maximizing ideal of economic rationality, and certainly can be tricked by framing manipulations into endorsing blatantly contradictory positions in one-trial experiments, it would be a serious mistake to suppose that they can be fooled indefinitely (Kagel and Roth 1995; Tetlock 1992). Most democracies will continue to muddle along reasonably well with the raw human material at their disposal.

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James Q. Wilson

IDEALIZING POLITICS

ABSTRACT: *Donald A. Wittman's* Myth of Democratic Failure *attempts to show that government is more rational than is often believed. For instance, Wittman argues that voters are tolerably well informed and that politicians are responsive to the voters' will. Unfortunately, Wittman's argument proceeds at the level of economic theory, which is often contradicted by empirical reality (and by non-economic theories that take account of political reality). It is no better to defend democracy on a priori grounds, as Wittman does, than to attack it on those grounds, as other economists who turn to the analysis of politics tend to do.*

There are two views of markets and politics. The first holds that markets maximize wealth, while politics, though necessary to a limited degree, reduces it. The other is that markets, though of some value, are shot through with so many imperfections that politics not only helps increase wealth, it attends to its better distribution. In *The Myth of Democratic Failure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 1), Donald A. Wittman, a professor of economics, disagrees with both views. To him, "both political and economic markets work well".

By working well, Wittman means that both markets and politics are efficient; by efficient, he means that both markets and politics contribute to wealth maximization. This, of course, is not the conventional view among economists. Not only would Milton Friedman

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object to the opinion that politics maximizes wealth, so would many other economists who may not share Friedman's policy views. To them, economic markets, if reasonably free, will produce greater wealth than political markets. People make money in markets; government taxes it away from them. There is, of course, an economic argument for government activity, but it generally rests on the observation that there has been a market failure. The existence of a monopoly supplier, the need to achieve a public good such as national defense for which no one will pay, the presence of uncompensated externalities such as pollution, and the existence of unavoidable consumer ignorance about the contents of (for example) a bottle of medicine can thus justify government action.

To economists, however, political markets also have many obvious defects. Voters are ignorant of policy choices or, if well informed, are inclined to conceal their real preferences in order to get something without paying for it. Politicians are opportunistic, seeking to evade voter control and seize whatever chances they have to enhance their ambitions by catering to special-interest groups. If politicians can reduce the supply of some valued commodity (for example, the opportunity to acquire a license to be a doctor), they can generate an economic "rent" for some voters (for example, doctors who face less competition), and then take back from the voters a part of this rent (for example, campaign contributions from doctors).

To make matters worse, Congress not only caters to organized pressure groups, it is a collection of elected representatives from localities that serves local and partial interests at the expense of larger, more general ones. And the laws Congress passes are administered by bureaucracies that tend to be coercive monopolies with perverse incentives.

In the teeth of these well-known arguments, Wittman wants to explain that "democratic markets are organized to promote wealth-maximizing outcomes, that these markets are highly competitive, and that political and bureaucratic entrepreneurs are rewarded for efficient behavior" (2). He tries to do this in a series of chapters that explain why voters are rational and reasonably well-informed, how the opportunism of politicians is checked by competition, the means by which Congress resists localism and pressure groups, and the ability of bureaucracies to be efficient.

Being an economist, Wittman takes the economic view of politics. That view, of course, rests on the assumption that people try to maxi-

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mize their utilities. These utilities are exogenous; that is to say, economists take them as given and do not investigate how they are formed or changed. He chides political scientists for lacking a "coherent understanding of democratic phenomena," by which he means that they are not economists. To political scientists such as myself, on the other hand, our field lacks coherence precisely because we try—admirably and ambitiously—to find out how preferences are formed and changed. But to Wittman, the criticisms of political markets rest on misunderstood economic arguments that can be set right by making correct economic arguments.

And that is Wittman's chief problem. Understanding politics is helped by having a good theory, but it is helped even more by having a good grasp of the facts.

Wittman makes good use of some facts. He notes that many political scientists have found evidence that voters are reasonably well-informed, not, perhaps, about the details of policy choices but certainly with respect to media cues, personal ideology, and party labels, all of which tell the voter where candidates are likely to stand. He neglects to mention the pioneering work of V. O. Key, Jr., who showed that voters who switch from one party to the other do so on the basis of reasonable information; but despite this gap Wittman gets the essential message correct.

He is also right to point out how much competition is involved in electoral races. Though incumbents usually win elections, legislative action often follows rather than produces shifts in public opinion. Incumbents win, not because they have bamboozled the voters into supporting what the incumbents want, but because incumbents are skilled at both detecting strong public choices and evading blame from electoral rivals who might wish to attack them for having ignored even weak public preferences.

And Wittman has some sensible things to say about the organization of Congress, noting, accurately, that there has been a sharp decline in locality-serving pork-barrel legislation over the last several years and that several important pieces of legislation, such as NAFTA, have passed despite intensive organized opposition.

But when he moves beyond the questions of voter rationality and the links between legislators and their constituents' preferences, he pays attention chiefly to economic theory rather than to well-developed evidence. He examines the claim that politicians and interest groups engage in rent-seeking largely on theoretical grounds, with

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very little attention to studies about how rents have been conferred on organized interests at the expense of unorganized publics. As a result, he thinks that rent-seeking exists "more in the eye of the beholder than in any objective measure" (36). But he scarcely refers to any of the better empirical studies of rent-seeking. He does not mention Robert Crandall's (1984) estimate that import quotas on automobile imports, designed in part to save the jobs of auto workers, cost $160,000 per job saved per year. He makes no mention of Michael Munger's (1984) estimate that the cost to consumers (in the early 1980s) of tariff legislation was about $70 billion. There are no references to the analysis of public education done by John Chubb and Terry Moe (1990) that discusses the costs to big-city residents, especially poor ones, of having to contend with a monopolistic public school system. Wittman's discussion of farm subsidies is, at best, perfunctory. When he mentions rent control, he notes how few cities have supported it, neglecting the enormous costs (for example, celebrities getting below-market-rent apartments, landlords postponing or ignoring building maintenance, builders preoccupied with constructing high-cost units) inflicted on millions of residents of New York and other cities for many decades.

In discussing pressure-group demands, Wittman wishes to show that the power of concentrated interests is exaggerated. He is right to say that concentrated interests often lose (as they did in the abolition of the Civil Aeronautics Board and many other examples of business deregulation). But he is wrong to argue, almost entirely on theoretical grounds, that such interests lack the immense advantages of organization, effort, and resources. His argument is unconvincing, not only because it is implausible theoretically, but because there are scarcely any facts adduced to support it. Such evidence as he notes has to do with the effect of campaign contributions on legislative outcomes. He is right to say that this evidence shows few large effects, but campaign contributions are one of the weakest tools available to organized interests. Vastly more important is pressure-group influence that results from marshaling facts and arguments, stimulating letters and phone calls, and organizing meetings.

Wittman's treatment of bureaucratic organizations is also off the mark. Most of his attention is devoted to the question of whether bureaucratic budgets grow incrementally (rather than by large changes) and whether bureaucrats make decisions by muddling through (as opposed to acting rationally). These are interesting acade-

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mic quarrels, but they do not reach the central issue. While a market imperfection may necessitate government action, the agency created to carry it out will suffer from its own imperfections. First, the agency head will often be unable to define an efficient course of action or, having defined it, will be unable to impose that course on his subordinates. Now, technical efficiency is not the same thing as wealth maximization, but it is, in general, a necessary prelude to it. If every agency spends more (or less) money than it would if it knew how to achieve its goal efficiently, then more (or less) money will be spent than should be spent to achieve a desired state of affairs. For example, rival firms might own parks that the public visits. Wishing to maximize profits, they will try to alter investments in the parks and fees charged to park visitors until no further change would make any park visitor better off without making some visitor worse off, guided in this effort by the resulting profits and losses. A government agency that owns all parks would have no similar way of deciding on investments and fees. Those would be set by government fiat.

Second, bureaucrats are unable to extract for their own benefit any surplus revenues. As a result, they lack not only the means but the incentives to direct the agency toward the most efficient course of action. The public agency that owned all parks, for example, might wish to compete with private parks (for example, Disney World), but the public officials would have no material stake in doing so because any extra revenues they captured would be sent back to the Treasury.

Third, government decisions often do not allow choices. If one agency sets all park policies, every park must conform to the politically salient demands of politically influential users. Those users—firms that graze cattle, mine resources, or cut timber; or social groups that want nice views, hiking trails, and fishing spots—will produce for the agency a set of goals and constraints that sharply narrow how much freedom it has to choose its own course of action. In an effort to cope with these political constraints, many parks will be identical even though large minorities would prefer different choices. For example, all, or almost all, parks might allow some logging when many backpackers would prefer some parks with no logging at all.

What is true for running parks is also true for other tasks, such as running schools, creating farm subsidies, controlling rents, buying supplies, and allocating gasoline.

Economists have made a theoretical argument that government is inefficient and Wittman has made, in large measure, a theoretical ar-

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gument why it is not. This theorizing is useful, and sometimes guides important empirical tests. But in a book that wants to deal fully with this issue, it is astonishing that there are no references either to empirical work or to more theoretical arguments, such as those of Charles Wolf, Jr., (1993) or William C. Mitchell (1994) claiming that government failures are at least as important as market failures.

Nonetheless, Wittman's book makes an important contribution. It challenges scholars who have made theoretical arguments about government failure to back up their claims with evidence that their theories work as they suppose. Unfortunately, Wittman does not supply enough evidence of his own to tell his readers if this challenge might be met.

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Rogan Kersh

ANTI-DEMOCRATIC DEMOS: THE DUBIOUS BASIS OF CONGRESSIONAL APPROVAL

ABSTRACT: *In representing a fragmented pluralist polity, the U.S. Congress inevitably exhibits high levels of conflict and disagreement. Increasingly, the American public finds such conflict—the ordinary procedures of legislative democracy—distasteful. As members of Congress pay closer attention to approval ratings and other poll measures, their natural inclination may be to avoid legislating, especially on controversial issues. This response to the preference of the demos has profoundly antidemocratic implications.*

I begin with a puzzle. In mid-1998, the 105th U.S. Congress was judged favorably by well more than half the American public, according to a range of national opinion polls.[1] Such popular heights were last achieved more than 15 years earlier and by only a handful of Congresses since World War II.[2] Moreover, the high ratings of the 105th Congress followed more than a decade of dismally low approval ratings that inspired a wealth of academic writing on the causes of public displeasure—aversion is not too strong a word—toward the

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national legislature. Beginning in mid-1997, however, public support rose rapidly, eventually approaching in some polls the modern standard, the "Great Society" Congress of 1965–66. Even if short-lived, this sudden reverse in a "historic nadir in public satisfaction with Congress" (Kimball and Patterson 1997, 705), to quote a typical 1990s assessment, is remarkable. How to explain it?

So far as I know, no scholarly attempt has yet been made, doubtless due to the phenomenon's recency rather than its triviality. A few political journalists noted the rise in congressional ratings, usually with a wave in the direction of a booming economy or President Clinton's own sustained popularity. Yet past periods of economic success did not yield such leaps in public approval of Congress, and presidential popularity is only weakly correlated with support for Congress or other national institutions. I take these explanations up at greater length below.

The same 105th Congress was also one of the least active in the past half-century, measured either in conventional terms—time spent in session, number of votes taken, and so forth—or along the cloudier dimension of "important legislation produced."[3] The convergence of high popular approval and scant legislative activity is novel in modern congressional history, and poses troubling questions for democratic theory as well as U.S. political practice. I propose to use the popularity-inactivity connection as a window into broader issues of democratic participation in American government, examining along the way a pair of recent academic studies of Congress and the public. I begin by inspecting explanations for the boost in congressional approval ratings.

Congressional Accomplishments vs. Public Ignorance

One possible reason for the new appeal of Congress, promoted by conservatives on Capitol Hill (Helton 1998), is that satisfied citizens were rewarding a legislature that had achieved the goals it was elected to accomplish. Much as the Democratic 89th Congress carried out Johnson's immensely popular Great Society program (and, behind an influx of liberal freshman members, enacted a host of measures not originating with Johnson),[4] the story might go, the Republican 104th and 105th fulfilled primary public goals. (This explanation is consistent with the overall success of incumbents in the November 1998

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elections, although it may not be compatible with the upset defeats of a small number of conservative Republicans, such as Lauch Faircloth of North Carolina.)

Setting aside for now the difficulty of accurately discerning public desires, how plausible is the conservative claim? House leaders point proudly to the "Contract with America" as their signal achievement, but of the Contract's original 21 agenda items, only a third had been enacted after three-plus years of GOP rule. The "revolutionary" first year of Newt Gingrich's speakership, when the House labored around the clock, produced virtually no significant policy results.[5] Whatever the accuracy of Republican rhetoric about a popular mandate after the 1994 elections (and the fact is that most voters had not even heard of the Contract), it translated poorly into legislative accomplishments, a reality epitomized by the government shutdown in the winter of 1995–96. This distance between platform and policy outcomes is further underscored by polls demonstrating that on a number of issues for which congressional Republicans claim credit—crime control, welfare reform, tax relief—the public either divided responsibility or assigned it mostly to President Clinton and other Democratic leaders.

A stripped-down version of the "policy" explanation holds that the achievement of a balanced federal budget in 1997–98 accounts for congressional popularity. James L. Payne's *The Culture of Spending* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1991), although dated, offers a compelling argument against such a view. The book's longest chapter denies the conventional thesis that members of Congress (hereafter MCs) support expanded federal spending because their constituents demand it. Instead, Payne elaborately argues, most House and Senate members become convinced that particular government programs are efficacious and responsible. Agents of this persuasion are not ordinary voters but the usual Beltway iron-triangle suspects: lobbyists, executive administrators whose jobs depend on the programs in question, and a few direct beneficiaries. Thus, genuine convictions about the public good tend to drive the deficit to dangerous extremes. Meanwhile, the so-called "ordinary American," charmingly portrayed by Payne as "hang[ing] over the back fence and swap[ping] yarns about 'gov'ment waste' with his neighbor" (7), is victimized by a "Washington system" voracious for his tax dollars, as well as by mass media that indoctrinate the masses with seductive messages about government's myriad benefits (71–75).

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Most members of Congress and other federal officials, Payne writes, fall prey to a "prospending persuasion" soon after arriving in Washington (18–23, 79–87). Fueled by this spirit, deficits are driven ever higher, to the point where only a populist "second Madisonian revolution" (181) could free the nation from its budgetary shackles. Apart from this rather breathless conclusion, Payne's is a sound work, marshalling evidence from many quarters—surely this is the only scholar to have engineered his own testimony before congressional committees to test his central hypothesis!—to draw a convincing portrait of a spending system out of control.[6] Yet barely five years after the book's publication, the "relentless," "endless" spiral of deficit budgeting was not merely slowed but altogether reversed, apparently for some time to come. This lends *The Culture of Spending* the musty odor of a late-1980s monograph on the Soviet Union's unbreachable hegemony.

Needless to say, the precipitous decline in the deficit was not achieved by a "Madisonian revolution" consisting of term limits and other radical changes in congressional procedures, including a return to closed-door committee sessions. But Payne's account neatly fits the argument that recent congressional actions explain popular approval. A public overwhelmingly opposed to deficit spending, Payne would surely hold, was finally rewarded by the 104th and 105th Congresses, which (somehow) managed to repudiate Washington's spending culture and restore sane fiscal practices.

Yet Payne himself strikes a powerful blow against this notion. In laboring to overturn the "electoral-connection" idea—that MCs vote for more spending because self-interested constituents want them to—he advances a proposition mostly avoided in contemporary democratic theory: that the public (individually or *en masse*) has very limited ability to understand the connection between MC actions and legislative outcomes. Summarizing 40 years of opinion research, spurred initially by the landmark University of Michigan study, *The American Voter* (1960), Payne writes:

> These surveys have repeatedly found that voters are remarkably ignorant about even simple, dramatic features of the political landscape. The vast majority of voters cannot recall the names of congressional candidates in the most recent election; they cannot use the labels 'liberal' and 'conservative' meaningfully; they do not know which party controls Congress; they are wildly wrong about elementary facts about

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> the federal budget, and they do not know how their congressmen vote on even quite salient policy questions. In other words, they are generally incapable of rewarding or punishing their congressman for his action on spending bills. (118)

So much for the possibility that Payne's backyard-fence voters rewarded lawmakers for balancing the budget. If Payne is right about the extent of public ignorance, it is hard to believe that many voters would have been aware of the shrinking deficit by 1998. And even if they were, it is unlikely that they would connect this fact to acts of the national legislature.

The Economy, Stupid?

A second general explanation for Americans' suddenly sunny view of their legislature relates to U.S. economic expansion over the past several years. A number of studies have explained electoral outcomes primarily in terms of economic effects (Tufte 1975), and the point could be adapted to approval ratings as well.

Qualifying this view at least somewhat is the fact that longitudinal measures of congressional approval are historically unresponsive to economic booms and busts (Patterson and Caldeira 1990, 38–39). The current expansion has been underway since mid-1992, yet all major national monthly surveys show Congress polling in the 20- to mid-30-percent range into 1997, rising into the 40s only late that year and not crossing the 50-percent threshold until 1998. A more refined argument might be that good economic times and high presidential popularity together explain most of the rise in approval for Congress. But these two conditions have simultaneously obtained at various points in recent decades, without a boost in congressional ratings like that of early 1998. Following the "Desert Storm" military victory over Iraq, when President Bush polled an all-time high approval rating of 91 percent and the Reagan economic expansion was still underway (though in its final stages), Congress rose from only 26 to 32 percent approval in Gallup's ratings. Multivariate statistical analysis may provide better assessment of the economic hypothesis;[7] for now, count the economy and presidential popularity as, at best, partial influences, and let us turn to an explanatory variable more endogenous to the Congress itself.

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Congressional Inaction

As noted earlier, along with rising congressional approval ratings in 1997–98 there was a palpable slowdown in legislative activity and output. Might these ostensibly disparate features be related? If so, what are the implications for representative government?

John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse set out a few years ago to understand why Congress as a body was accorded *low* esteem by the public, even as individual members regularly won re-election and comparatively high ratings from their constituents. Their work, *Congress as Public Enemy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), is a convincing analysis of the national legislature's unpopularity, with promising application to the recent reversal of that trend.

The authors carefully test and reject leading explanations for popular dislike of Congress, including partisan affiliation, scandal, ideological orientation, public preference for the president, or MCs' failure to enact the public's desired policy outcomes. Instead, they conclude, the legislative process is chiefly to blame. And not only its occasional failures, but the quotidian work of representative democracy. Based on extensive survey and focus-group research, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse demonstrate that Americans deeply mistrust democratic procedures: they

> do not wish to see uncertainty, conflicting opinions, long debate, competing interests, confusion, bargaining, and compromised, imperfect solutions. They want government to do its job quietly and efficiently, sans conflict and sans fuss. In short . . . they often seek a patently unrealistic form of democracy. (147)

Given the inevitable preponderance of all these features in an institution organized to represent and balance a vast range of diverse interests, little wonder that Hibbing and Theiss-Morse find the public "fed up, disgusted, and repulsed by Congress" (41). Congress, it appears, is the people's "enemy" in large part *because* it is so democratic, such a visibly contentious body.[8] Even a populace ill informed about policy details reacts viscerally to reports of gridlock and conflict on Capitol Hill, the authors note.

Neither Payne nor Hibbing and Theiss-Morse anticipated Congress's rising popularity. But of the two books, *Congress as Public*

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Enemy provides materials for by far the more compelling account of this paradox. If the regular activity of representative democracy is a major basis for popular disapproval, particularly when aired before the public on C-SPAN and in extensively covered open committee hearings, then the less of that activity, the more popular Congress should become.

As it happens, the work of the 105th Congress in 1997–98 fit that bill well. A diminished legislative agenda kept significant policy differences largely out of the news; even White House threats to campaign against a "do-nothing" Congress spurred little legislative action. And the sole major accomplishment of the previous two years, a budget plan to eliminate the deficit by 2002, was a model of cooperation between the parties on Capitol Hill and between Congress and the president. Most lesser actions were similarly bipartisan: revised procedures for child adoption, a transportation bill, a chemical-weapons treaty ratification featuring close cooperation between the conservative Republican Senate Majority Leader and Clinton's national security adviser, and sketchy plans to reform the IRS and HMOs. Moreover, Congress mounted a much-ballyhooed effort to restore "civility" to legislative debate and other activity: this was widely reported in the press, though its effects on popular approval are difficult to measure. Conversely, when Congress began impeachment hearings that were widely described as "partisan," its approval ratings plummetted.

A working hypothesis, then, is that absent any urgent policy crisis, a "do-little" Congress will garner high approval precisely because of its inactivity. Indeed, though Hibbing and Theiss-Morse overlook the fact, a few Congresses in this century had impressive lawmaking records while producing a minimum of rancor, and they won wide popular favor.[9] In any case, citizens plainly prefer silence to the vigorous, acrimonious, sometimes frivolous debates sparked by most substantial legislative undertakings. And this public outlook appears to have intensified in the recent past, as one final survey suggests. For years various pollsters have asked a variant of the question, "What one problem in your life should Congress solve this year?" In mid-May 1998, taxes finished highest, as is fairly typical; second (and far ahead of such standbys as the economy, Social Security, and so on) was the unusual response, "Nothing."[10]

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Democratic Implications

It would therefore seem that one aspect of democracy—public debate—is at odds with another: public consent. If so, it poses a profound dilemma for democratic theory.

While the practice of decision-making in Congress and other governing institutions takes various forms, most authorities on the subject agree that legitimately democratic procedures must be marked by contestation and competition. Joseph Schumpeter insisted that, in contrast to totalitarian regimes, "competitive struggle" characterized "the democratic method" ([1942], 1976, 269). Open societies depend, in his view, on a culture of argument, negotiation, and compromise, particularly at the highest levels of government. Three decades later, Robert Dahl (1971) likewise listed competition among political elites and programs as one of the two basic properties of democratic systems. Building on such claims, Albert Hirschman has contended that conflict is not only inevitable in pluralist societies, but a leading indicator of systemic health. Bargaining, disagreement, and other ubiquitous features of liberal democracies are in fact the polity's "pillars," helping bind the whole and allowing it to muddle through to the next round of adjustments (1994, 214 and passim.).[11] To the extent that lawmaking is made more efficient and less messily conflictual, Dahl has argued recently, this is likely to *diminish* citizen access and participation (1994, 30–32).

On the other hand, congruence between citizens' preferences and officials' activities is, one might think, even more fundamental to democratic theory than is the need for conflict. Dahl himself requires that "a majority of citizens can induce the government to do what they most want it to do and to avoid doing what they most want it not to do" (1989, 95). But what if the majority of the *demos* is averse to democratic competition and debate?

Dahl, along with most liberal democrats, places great faith in the conjuction of competitive processes and public preferences. In *Democracy and Its Critics* (1989, 135–52, 178–87), he comes closest to addressing the possibility of a disjuncture between the two when he opposes allowing the people to overturn basic (open, conflictual) legislative procedures—despite his objections elsewhere to the antimajoritarian "overkill" built into the Constitution (1982, 190–93). If democracy is, as most liberal thinkers hold, instrumental to securing the rights of

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the individual, and if a pluralism of values is a result, then free and contentious debate among the people's representatives is essential and public preferences to the contrary are to be disregarded, it appears. Yet no contemporary liberal theorist seriously contemplates this dilemma, let alone the possibility of a *demos* that opposes public conflict *without* wanting to violate individual rights.

Those democratic thinkers who allocate much more control to expert leaders than do Dahl and other liberals also sidestep this dilemma. Schumpeter's "competitive elitist" view, for example, while depicting "the electoral mass" as "incapable of action other than a stampede," requires popular consent to legitimize activities of victorious elites ([1942] 1976, 283 and 251–96). Even a distantly representative Congress has failed to win this consent if between three- and four-fifths of the populace usually (and often vehemently) disapproves of the body's performance. The trustee-style leadership favored by competitive elitists is undermined if leaders are required to do as little as possible, or act with a minimum of public fuss.

Advocates of participatory or "unitary" democracy, such as Jane Mansbridge (1983), conceivably might find the 1998 rise in congressional popularity encouraging inasmuch as it reflected public support for a more consensual politics than the adversarial variant they criticize. The popular desire for swift, efficient legislative action unmarred by brokering, short-term *modus vivendi*, or partisan squabbling is loosely in line with the participatory democrats' emphasis on enacting commonly perceived interests. The short-lived civility initiative in the U.S. House upholds a further requirement set out by unitary democrats: that equal respect among participants mark all deliberations.

This line of reasoning falters, however, when measured against the most important aspect of unitary-democratic aims: widespread participation in governance. In no way has the current rise in public approval of Congress been accompanied by a more politically involved citizenry. Voter turnout in both the 1996 presidential election and the 1998 off-year contest set postwar lows (Wayne 1998). The volume of constituent communications may have risen somewhat due to e-mail and Web sites, but neither the actions of individual MCs nor the institutional work of committees and party leadership have been noticeably marked by more popular activity. Mansbridge and other participatory democrats envision an engaged, aware citizenry weighing in on policy decisions, not a legislature that satisfies the public by marking time. Vigorous, widespread deliberation among citizens and

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their representatives is the heart of democratic decision-making in the unitary model (e.g., Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 41–51, 130–64, 346–61).

Competitive legislative practices are therefore unimpeachable, according to democratic theorists of varying stripes. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse warn that public opposition to such practices may lead to sweeping, ill-conceived structural reform proposals; rising public cynicism about the legislature and concomitant decline in the "sanctity" of public laws; and difficulty in attracting well-qualified candidates. Another effect they could have mentioned is the tendency of many candidates for Congress, challengers and incumbents alike, to deprecate the institution in their campaigns, a practice Richard Fenno termed "running for Congress by running against it" (Fenno 1975). This most often means targeting the ordinary and (as Congress-watchers agree) necessary trappings of legislative activity: legislative slowdown or "gridlock," partisan debate, House and Senate staff levels, and the like. Nor will reforms of the campaign-finance system readily alleviate public disapproval of essential legislative procedures. Congress slid in public esteem following a series of "sunshine" reforms after 1974, which made conflict and competition much more visible.

A Deepening Dilemma

Why is the public is so averse to conflict in Congress and other realms of governance? One possibility is that Americans have always been this way. The *Federalist Papers*, designed to attract public support for the new Constitution, repeatedly refer to the "unanimity" and admirable harmony among delegates to the Constitutional convention. Madison and his co-authors were able politicians who presumably knew their audience. Public resistance to high-level partisanship and disagreement may be a constant over time.

Still, U.S. history is littered with strong partisan disputes and intense public disagreement, often over matters of high moral principle. A genteel style, if it ever colored American politics very deeply, began eroding with the populist tide of Andrew Jackson's inauguration. And as recently as the mid-1960s, Americans embraced a Congress that tackled controversial issues of civil rights, immigration, and expanding social services. What has changed, especially since the 1970s, is the

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public visibility of disagreement among lawmakers. With television cameras encouraging partisan speechmaking and the national media energetically reporting conflict, often at the expense of legislative details (Rozell 1996), it can appear as if little but petty gamesmanship and noisy argument occupies official Washington. A diet so swollen with acrimony is all but guaranteed to choke its consumers.

Thus the media's "if it bleeds, it leads" mentality, translated into coverage of dissent on Capitol Hill, likely helps drive public disapprobation of democratic processes. But Congress itself is a further cause of *demos* dissatisfaction with legislative democracy, in a way more commonly identified with the presidency. In *The Rhetorical Presidency*, Jeffrey Tulis describes much executive-branch activity as contributing to a self-fulfilling cycle of public relations and law making. The president and other executive officials act as "rhetorical entrepreneurs," mobilizing public concern around putative crises and demanding immediate government action to resolve them (Tulis 1987, 15–80; see also Lowi 1985). Much the same is true of Congress. David Mayhew describes a "Capitol Hill mindset of problem-solving," in which MCs "come to believe—sometimes quickly and surprisingly—that a 'problem' exists in some area and that it can and must be 'solved'" (Mayhew 1991, 130, 134). Cued by their MCs, citizens are inclined to define good government as a matter of identifying and swiftly disposing of agenda items. Passing laws almost becomes an end in itself. Whatever interferes with this process, from filibusters to foot-dragging, is seen as partisan bickering and arouses public ire.

The rhetorical Congress is almost guaranteed to produce its own unpopularity except in the exceptional circumstance of a single party, united in its agenda, controlling the legislature and the executive. Otherwise, when inevitable obstacles slow the path of policy making, public disillusionment with an ineffective Congress results. In reaction to public displeasure with the routine practices of legislative decision making, Congress obligingly performs fewer and fewer of them.

MCs themselves claim "not to be greatly influenced by public opinion" (Jacobs et al. 1998, 22). But their actions seem to belie this assertion. Congressional leaders repeatedly invoked the institution's high ratings in 1998. House Republican whip Tom DeLay declared in March that "this is the do-nothing-the-liberals-like Congress. Maybe that's why the poll numbers for the Congress are at an all-time high" (Katz 1998). One recent study persuasively demonstrates a

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"rising hegemony of mass opinion" in U.S. politics, especially since the mid-1970s. Greater public influence is evident across a range of policy realms, from the arcane (e.g., trucking deregulation, petroleum pricing) to the much-discussed (e.g., tax reform) (Quirk and Hinchliffe 1998).

Among a people committed to self-governance at least in principle, and long suspicious of elite leadership, more popular input may appear eminently desirable. This is what critics of interest-group influence, and democratic theorists, want. But the apparent growth in the power of public opinion does not reflect a more informed public. Payne's indictment of mass ignorance of Congressional activity is amply backed by empirical evidence (see especially Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). In the four decades since *The American Voter*'s original measurements, individual voters' "attitudes" have become more sturdily held and defended (Nie et al. 1979). Stronger ideological and issue orientations have replaced a relatively blind loyalty to party affiliation among many citizens. But the basis for these attitudes is rarely careful attention to policy debates. "The post-1964 electorate knows where the parties and candidates stand on a number of issues; but it may know little else about those issues" (Quirk and Hinchliffe 1998, 25). Rational though ignorance about complex policy making may be for the individual voter, it raises serious questions about the wisdom of expanding deference to the popular will.

Nonetheless, social scientists seem inclined to overlook or explain away the dangers accompanying an uninformed populace. The groundbreaking studies of public ignorance of basic political facts (Campbell et al. 1960, Converse 1964) spawned a huge literature—yet curiously, one devoted mainly to more precisely measuring or explaining voter preferences and to debating whether they amounted to "nonattitudes," no matter how poorly grounded these preferences were. More recently, scholars have labored to demonstrate the rationality of aggregate voter opinion, despite the low levels of awareness displayed by individual citizens (Page and Shapiro 1992; contrast Weissberg 1996, who argues that the "marketplace of ideas" yields nonsense as readily as truth). Even analysts who, like Payne, criticize the uninformed public generally soften the blow by saluting the innate wisdom of backyard-fence deliberators.

More predictably, democratic theorists rarely address the problem of public ignorance. This reluctance likely stems from most of these

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scholars' primary concern: ensuring relatively equal participation for all members of society, in the face of potential or actual dominance of the political system by a power elite. Hence theorists urge increased voter turnout, apparently unconcerned about the misperceptions and minimal information involved in most voting decisions. They advocate a "more deliberative" U.S. democracy (Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 358), despite evidence that public deliberation is both deeply divided and fickle (see, e.g., Brodie and Blendon 1995, on health-care reform). Others argue that individual voters are highly rational participants in public debate despite repeated findings that most citizens lack rudimentary awareness of even elementary political matters.

Academic concern about democratic ignorance surfaces, if at all, in calls for improved education. These usually focus on developing citizens' capacity for deliberative and associational activity (e.g., Gutmann 1987). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse end their book by advocating "a totally restructured educational process" centered around early instruction in "unavoidable democratic realities," such as how often and vehemently Americans disagree on many policy matters, how watered-down most legislative compromises are, and how debate can entail what looks like mere bickering—and how vital these realities are to productive outcomes (160–61). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse further recommend an open-ended, informed public debate on congressional process. Absent the virtual revolution in education they prescribe, however, it is difficult to see how such a debate could even begin. In the meantime, a pressing need exists for comprehensive studies of how a detached, scantily informed citizenry affects policy outcomes and officials' behavior, especially as public influence over decision making continues to grow.

Public ignorance and apathy toward most policy matters have been constant (or have grown worse) for over three decades. Yet the same period has seen increasing reliance on finely tuned instruments for measuring popular opinion, and more vigorous application of the results in policy making. Put these two observations together and one perceives a government that places ever-greater weight on uninformed, uninterested opinion. One consequence may be a public dissatisfied with any legislative action that does not fit the most simplistic description of "problem solving." When this is not possible, as the 105th Congress discovered, the next-best thing is no action at all.

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NOTES

1. Some approval figures for the 105th Congress: 66 percent (ABC/*Washington Post*, February 1); 61 percent (NBC/*Wall St. Journal*, September 18); 57 percent (Gallup, February 13–15); 56 percent (*Time*/CNN, March 19); 56 percent (ABC/*Post*, September 13); 55 percent (*Time*/CNN, September 15).
2. Parker 1989, 50, provides a table of congressional job approval ratings from 1939 to 1984; see also Patterson and Caldeira 1990, 29 (ratings for 1964–1985) and Durr et al. 1997 (for 1974–1993). I also examined monthly or quarterly approval measures by Gallup (April 1974 to April 1998); Harris Surveys (1965 to December 1997); ABC/*Washington Post* (September 1972 to September 1998); and *Time*/CNN (October 1990 to September 1998). Peaks from the Parker table include 1953 (65 percent), just after the Korean War armistice; 1965 (73 percent), during one of the most productive Congresses ever; and 1984–85 (53 percent), as Reagan's "Morning in America" campaign reached fruition.
3. On workload, see *Congressional Record*, "Daily Digest," January 28, 1998, and Katz 1998. For analysis of "important legislation" in Congress, see Mayhew 1991, 34–50. The 1997–98 record includes only a package to balance the budget and slightly cut taxes (1997) and transportation reauthorization legislation (1998). See Doherty 1998.
4. Patterson 1996, 564 and 568–69, notes that "any reasonably competent liberal President would have done well" with a Congress primed for progressive legislation.
5. An enumeration of Contract agenda items and their enactment is in Bader 1997, 362–66. On assessing the first year of the 104th, see especially Dewar 1996, 31–32.
6. It should be noted that at least one independent study questions Payne's empirical findings: Aka et al. 1996.
7. See Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1993, 31–36, and Durr et al. 1997 (who find presidential approval to have a "nonsignificant" effect on congressional ratings: see 195, 199). Another prominent attempt to derive and measure a range of influences on Congress's approval ratings is Patterson and Caldeira 1990 (see esp. 38–40). They find "negligible" economic effects, and a public tendency "to separate the incumbents of the two institutions" (Congress and the presidency). As all the above-mentioned articles note, analyses of congressional approval are plagued by imprecise data.
8. A more recent analysis of congressional approval arrives at substantially similar conclusions to those of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse: see Durr et al. 1997 ("our research suggests that decreases in Congressional approval are, in part, simply a reaction to Congress doing its job," 199).
9. At least three examples come to mind of highly productive Congresses that operated with relatively little disagreement: the 1965–66 "Great Society" Congress; the "Hundred Days" Congress that ratified FDR's first set of New Deal objectives in 1933; and the Progressive-era Congress of 1913–15. Details on each are in Mayhew 1991.

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10. Conducted by The Polling Company May 13–14, 1998. Margin of error: +/– 2.8 percent. Report on file with author.
11. See also Robert Goodin's principled defense of "deadlock" (1996).

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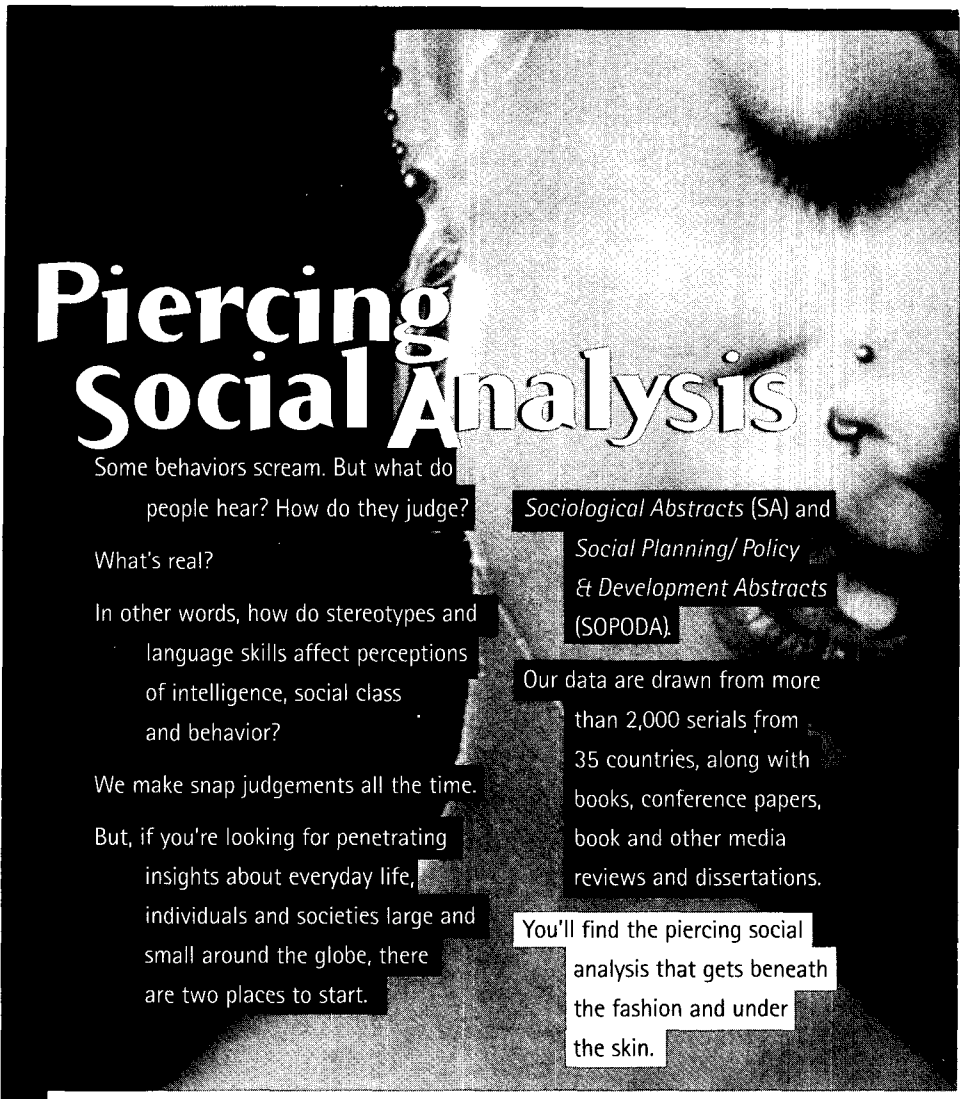
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